

IN QUEST OF GOLD

OR UNDER THE
WHANGA FALLS





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IN QUEST OF GOLD;

Or, Under the Whanga Falls.



"THE BEAUTIFUL CREATURE ROSE TO THE LEAP." (f. 264.) *Frontispiece.*

IN QUEST OF GOLD;

OR,

Under the Whanga Falls.

BY

ALFRED ST. JOHNSTON,

Author of "Camping among Cannibals," "Charlie Asgarde," &c.

WITH EIGHT ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY GORDON BROWNE.

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IN QUEST OF GOLD;

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CHAPTER I.

THE BIRTH OF AN ADVENTURE.

"ALEC, Alec," a strong, clear, boy's voice rang out from the gully, "are you up there? Whatever are you doing at this time of night?" And the next moment George Law, a tall, strongly made lad of fifteen or so, left the sandy bed of the dried-up river, and sprang up the great rocks, as lightly and actively as a cat, to where his elder brother was sitting alone.

"Hallo, Geordie, lad! is that you? I might have known it; no one else can climb the rocks as you do."

"I thought I should find you at 'The Castle.' What have you come for? There's something the matter, I'm sure there is. What is it, old boy?" He sat down as he spoke and passed his hand into his brother's arm. "Tea is quite ready, and the Johnny-cakes piping hot. Mother and Margaret couldn't think where you were, but I guessed you had ramped off to 'The Castle' for a quiet think. Come, tell us all about it."

For a moment Alec Law did not answer, but sat, as he had been sitting before his brother came, with

his chin on his hand and his elbow on his knee, looking with steady gaze over the tops of the wild, great trees that grew below them in a tangled mass of luxuriant greenery, towards that far-away strip of silver on which the moonlight fell, which he knew to be the sea. He was two or three years older than George, and was more developed and of a stouter build, but one could see at a glance that they were brothers: they had the same dark eyes and level brows, and the same dark wavy hair. They were dressed alike, which made the likeness stronger. Just as nine-tenths of Australian bushmen do, they wore white—or what once were white—moleskin breeches, laced boots, gaiters, and red flannel shirts open at the throat, and with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow.

Alec turned when he found his arm taken, and, as he saw his brother, the stern look vanished from his determined face, and his eyes met Geordie's inquiring gaze with a softer light there than had shone in them before.

"Yes, you are right; something is the matter. I came here to try and think of a way out of it all. I didn't want to trouble you with it, so I came out alone."

"And did you think that I should not miss you? No, that plan will never pay. Don't let us begin to have secrets from one another, Alec; all the more reason I should know it, if it is trouble."

"I should have told you at once if I had thought you could help, but you can't."

"Mine may not be up to much, but two heads are better than one."

"Well this is all about it. You know that during

the two years after father's death we had that long dry season ; there was no rain, and every water-hole in the creek dried up ; the sheep and cattle died by hundreds at a time. That was the beginning of it."

"The beginning of what?"

"Of our getting into debt. Things seemed to go from bad to worse from that time, and mother had to borrow a lot of money from old Mr. Crosby, of Brisbane. He was a friend of father's, and said that he would advance money on the run, but that mother must mortgage it to him. He said it was merely a form, and that mother might trust so old a friend not to take advantage of it, if at any time a difficulty arose about paying the interest on the money we had borrowed. So she signed all the papers."

"Well! has there been any difficulty?"

"Yes, from the very first. He cheated poor mother, who didn't know anything of business, most shamefully, and gets interest twice as high as he fairly ought. It has crippled us for years. We could not fence the farther stations, we haven't been able to buy new stock, and many a time mother would have been unable to produce the yearly interest-money if old Macleod had not been here to help her with one of his clever plans."

"What a shame! What an old thief that Mr. Crosby is. And to think of mother having all this trouble, and never saying a word to anybody."

"She didn't want to trouble us. I'm not sure that Margaret has not known since she came back from Brisbane. But things have come to a climax now. The price of wool has gone down lower than ever, and our last shearing hardly realised enough to cover the working expenses of the run. Mother wrote to

tell Mr. Crosby how it was, and that she hoped to be able to pay him next year; but this has just given him the very opportunity he wanted, and he is down on to us at once."

"What can he do?"

"Why, sell Wandaroo straight off. Don't you see, he lent us money on the security of the run, and if we can't pay the interest he can sell everything right over our heads?"

"Sell Wandaroo!" said George, in a voice of the utmost astonishment and grief. "But it is ours. We were born here. I could live nowhere else. Oh, I love it so, Alec."

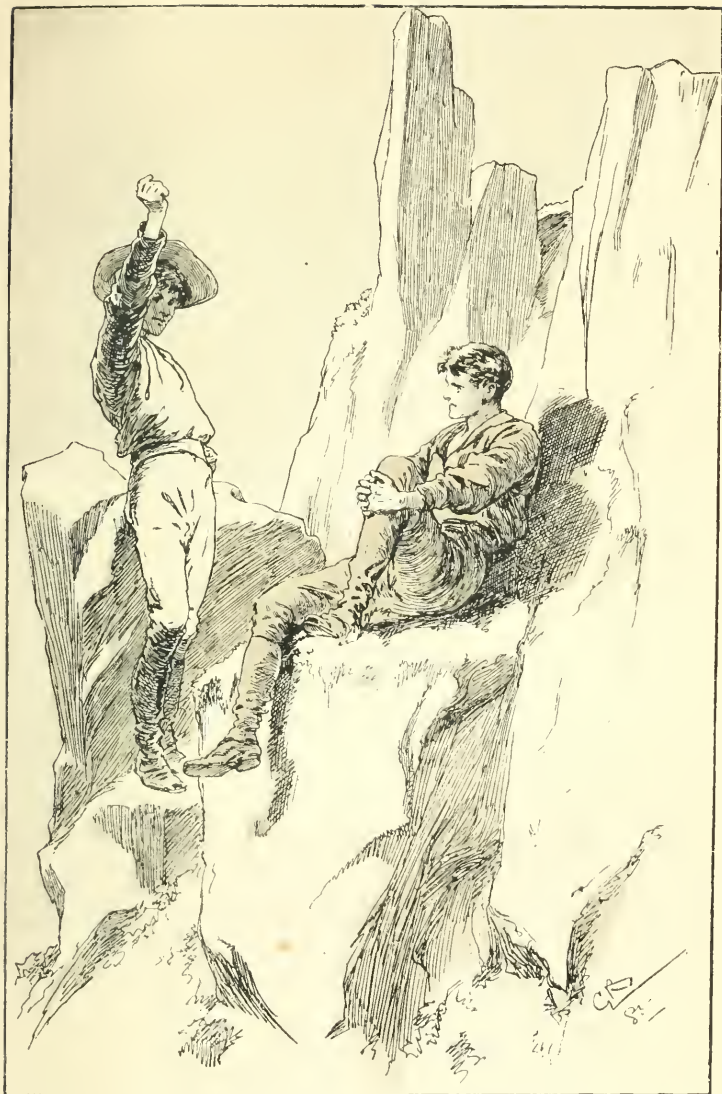
"So do I, so do we all," said the elder brother, in a pained but steady voice; "but he has the law on his side, and he can rob us of everything—for it is robbery."

"Has he said that he will not wait?"

"Yes. Macleod rode to Bateman yesterday, to get some more of that new sheep dip, and he brought a letter up from the steamer. Mr. Crosby says that he is very sorry that he can't wait, and that he must have the money at once; and, if we can't pay it to his agent in Parra-parra before a month, he shall put his men in possession, and we must turn out."

"How much do we owe him?"

"Oh, more than we can possibly get. The interest is £600. He has lent us £4,000, at 15 per cent., the miserly old Jew. Think of that, and he called himself our friend. Oh, Geordie, lad, I cannot bear to think of leaving Wandaroo. I love every mile of it;" and the poor fellow buried his face in his hands. "I think it would almost kill mother to have to go away."



“GOLD, GOLD! CHEER UP, ALEC; OF COURSE WE’LL HAVE IT.” (p. 5.)

"When did she tell you all this?"

"About two hours ago, when you were in the wool shed. I came out here; I could not bear to see her grief, as I could not help her; and I have been thinking, thinking till my brain burns."

"Ah, poor mother! I saw there was something wrong, though she tried to hide it, and to smile when I came in to tea. And Margaret never said my hair was rough, or anything. Have you thought of any plan, Alec?"

"No, I can think of nothing. If we sold every sheep on the run we could not raise the money. If I could be up and doing anything I should not care, but to sit here absolutely helpless will kill me. Nothing short of a gold mine can save us."

He spoke with the bitterness of despair in his voice, for life seemed very hopeless to him just then. He sat moodily gazing at the great, distant, purple hills, over which the golden round of the full moon was rising in the rich silence of the Australian night. But his words had a different effect upon George, who still sat with his sun-browned hand on his brother's arm.

The younger boy sprang up with a shout.

"Gold, gold! Cheer up, Alec; of course we'll have it. Do you mean to say that you have forgotten the story father used to tell us of how, when he and mother first came to Wandaroo, they found Black Harry with a nugget of pure gold slung round his neck on a bit of green cow-hide?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"And don't you recollect that father used to say that there was a huge fortune lying where that came from for the man that could find the place?"

He used to say that he should not try to find it himself, for he believed he could do better by honestly working on the run than by rushing off on a wild-goose chase after gold he might never find."

"But that was years ago, and Black Harry is dead long since."

"I know, I know," said George, eagerly; "but that old *gin*" (woman), "Ippai, was his wife, and she will be sure to know all about it. There are several boys of the tribe still on the run, and we can get them to go with us. They never forget a path, and can lead us back to the north-west, where they came from."

He had sprung up in his excitement, and talked rapidly and earnestly to Alec, who had turned round in astonishment at Geordie's glad voice. At first the more sober elder brother shook his head at George's wild proposition, but slowly the doubt seemed to fade from his face, and he seemed to catch some of the enthusiasm of the younger fellow. George Law was often the quicker of the brothers, but once let Alec make up his mind to anything, and nothing could turn him aside from carrying it out.

"Why not? Why not, Alec?" George pleaded. "What is the use of sitting here and doing nothing? If we fail, as you seem to think we shall, we shall be no worse off than we were before, and if we succeed, why——"

Here language failed him, he could only point across the gully in the direction of the home where he knew their mother was grieving.

Then Alec sprang up; he had caught fire at last. Geordie was right—no good could come of inaction. His face was all aglow with excitement now, and his strong right hand was clenched.

"I believe you, Geordie. It is our only chance. It seems to me very improbable that we shall find the gold, but we can do our best and try. Anything is better than staying here and doing nothing. Come, let us go in now or we shall have mother getting anxious about us. After tea I will go down to the native camp and see old Ippai, and find out all I can about that nugget. There is no time to be lost."

"When can we start, Alec?"

"To-morrow."

"Hurrah; but that is rather soon, isn't it?"

"What is the use of delay. If we are going we may as well go at once. Shearing is over and there is nothing to be done on the run that Macleod cannot see to. There's only the shepherding, and that can be done without us, particularly now that Yesslett is living with us; he can do ration-carrier's work. Don't tell mother what we are after; it would only frighten her and buoy her up with what may be a false hope. I will tell her that we are going away for some time."

George nodded, and without another word they turned and descended the steep dark rocks into the blackness of the gully. It was a dangerous place, for the side of the ravine on which the fantastic pile of rocks, which they called "The Castle," was placed, was of a great height, and the rocks themselves were bare and steep. But the two boys descended with sure and fearless tread; "The Castle" had been their favourite playing place when they were children, and custom had quite driven fear away.

Alec led the way with a firm, manly step, and George followed close upon him. Geordie saw that

Alec was thinking and did not wish to be disturbed, so he followed him without a sound. There was a perfect confidence between these two, which was marred by no little jealousies or selfishnesses. Brought up alone on the station with no other companion, for their sister was older than either of them, and had been away in Brisbane to be educated, they had become all in all to one another, and loved each other as very few brothers do. From this great affection a perfect understanding had grown up between them, and each one read the other as a well-loved book.

They had never been away from each other for more than a day, and they were never so happy as when together. Their father had been unable to afford to send them to school, as he had his daughter, for the early settlers in Queensland had not had very prosperous times, so they had learned from him the little that they knew. They were not very clever, these two lads; many an English boy of twelve knows more Latin and history and mathematics than they did, but they were fine, strong, healthy fellows, with pure and honest hearts; and they had learned from their father, both by example and precept, the maxims of an English gentleman. They both could ride as soon as they could walk, and had gained that perfect mastery and management of a horse that only constant riding from childhood can give. Then they were both excellent bushmen, and could do everything on the station as well as any of the hands, which perhaps, after all, was of more importance to two Australian boys than any command of Latin prose or knowledge of Greek roots could be.

Climbing up the other branch of the creek, and

passing through the thick strip of uncleared bush, where in the darkness the laughing jackasses were uttering their strange weird cry, they entered the paddock and approached the house.

Wandaroo had been purchased by Mr. Law shortly after the separation of Queensland from the colony of New South Wales, and whilst the former country was in a wild and almost unknown state. He had selected Wandaroo on account of the creek which ran through it, as he thought it would always furnish water for his flocks. The timber house that he had originally built was still standing, but had been greatly added to as his family increased, and he became able to afford to extend the old homestead. A large and wide verandah ran along two sides of the house, shading the living rooms (for coolness is the one thing most desired in tropical Queensland), and the posts and roof of it were covered with a mass of gorgeous creepers. The roof of the house and verandah was formed of large sheets of bark carefully stripped from the trees and flattened for the purpose. These are pegged down on to the rafters and make an admirable heat- and water-proof covering.

The buildings about a head station are numerous, and from a distance Wandaroo looked more like a little village than merely the homestead and out-buildings of a single squatter. On one side was the store, a most important part of every head station, where all imaginable articles in the way of food and clothing were kept. Beyond it was the bachelors' hut, where the men attached to the station lived, and farther away were the stables and cart-shed, and the dry store where flour, salt, &c., were kept. On the other side was the strongly-built stockyard into which

the herds of horses and cattle were driven at mustering time, and close by was the great wool shed where the sheep were clipped at shearing time and the fleeces stored.

To-night, by the light of the full moon, and of those great and glorious southern stars which blaze so royally in the Australian sky, the whole of the commonplace station buildings looked very beautiful. All little uglinesses were hidden, and the tender light, which fell so softly upon roof and wall and fencing, invested everything with a shadowy charm. The great gum trees by the house gleamed blue in the moonlight, and under their boughs the ruddy lights from the house shone out in brilliant contrast.

"Look at it, Alec," said George, breaking silence at last, as they crossed the paddock and approached the house. "Do you think that we can lose Wandaroo, which our father made, and where we were born?"

"No, we will not. *We will find that gold, or die in the attempt.* Nothing shall turn me back!"

So saying they entered the house.

CHAPTER II.

GAINING INFORMATION.

ONLY staying to wash their hands and to put themselves in some slight degree of order, they entered the large and comfortable room where tea was waiting for them; it was the largest in the house, and served for dining and general living room. Mrs. Law and Margaret had finished their meal before the boys came in, for they could not keep the manager, old Macleod, waiting. They were standing near the bright petroleum lamp talking earnestly. Mrs. Law, whose busy hands were never idle, was knitting a grey worsted stocking for one of the boys. The one woman servant, Mrs. Beffling by name, whom Mrs. Law kept to help her in the house was busy at one of the large cupboards at the end of the room, so that at first Alec could say nothing of what he intended doing, but directly that tea was over—it did not take them long that night, for both boys were too excited to eat—and the woman had left the room, he rose from the table.

“Mother,” he began, with that simple directness of speech that was so characteristic of him, “I have been up at the rocks over the gully, and have been thinking what we must do. George came and found me out.” Here he half turned and nodded towards his brother, who had moved to the wide open window, and was looking out into the night.

"And I have told him all about it. We have laid our heads together, and have determined to go out prospecting to-morrow. You know that when father first bought Wandaroo he reserved the right of extending the run, at the same price per mile, towards the north-west. He never prospected the country in that direction, and since his death we have never done it. If we find good grass land there, and well-watered country, we might, if the worst comes to the worst, be able to take up a run there, and in a few years' time be doing all right again."

All this that Alec said was quite true. He had long wanted to prospect the country that lay beyond the borders of their own great run, but although it was the truth it was not the whole of the truth. He said nothing of their wild dream of finding gold in those far-distant north-west ranges. As he had said to George, he knew that the thought of it would alarm their mother, for the native tribes were warlike, cruel, and unfriendly, and besides this he did not wish to give her any hope that might fail her at last. Alec spoke in the low tones his voice always sank to when he was excited, and when he ended his square jaw was set in a firm, resolute manner that in itself showed the determined and unconquerable spirit of the young man.

Mrs. Law knew her sons well enough to be sure that when Alec spoke and looked as he then did he would brook no opposition, and she was a wise enough woman to have learned that she might lead her high-spirited sons when she would fail did she try to drive them. In Australia, too, a man seems to develop earlier than in Europe; and although Alec

was only nineteen, he was always consulted on the management of the run, and his opinion as an experienced bushman and stock rider attentively listened to.

"Have you carefully thought of it, Alec?" said Mrs. Law, laying aside her knitting for a moment, and looking at her son, for the suddenness of his resolve had somewhat astonished her, as she had never heard anything of this plan before. "How will the station go on?"

"Yes, mother, I have thought of it all, I think. We are full-handed just now, for Macleod engaged that extra shepherd that we wanted for the South Creek station when he was down in Bateman. He will be a good useful fellow, I think. And Yesslett can act as ration-carrier; he knows the run well enough by this time."

"How long shall you be away?" asked Mrs. Law.

"Can't say. We shall take flour enough, and tea, and so on, for a month or so, but we may be longer, so you mustn't be frightened, mother. We must face the worst, and be prepared for a move if that old brute of a Crosby turns us out."

"Who shall you take with you?" asked Mrs. Law, managing to repress the tears that lay so near her poor sorrowful eyes.

"George, and one or two of the black boys."

"Oh, shall you take Geordie?"

"Yes, mother," Margaret interposed; "let George go." She knew well enough that the brothers would stand by each other to the death, and that George, young though he was, would be Alec's best protection.

"Do you think that I would let Alec go without me?" said a clear voice from the window.

And Alec said, "I would sooner take Geordie than any man on the station. He rides and climbs better than any one of them, and nothing tires him. And now, mother, good-night. Don't sit up for me ; you have had an anxious, sad day. I am going down to the *gunyahs*" (huts) "to get a couple of boys to go with us, and to glean as much information as I can about the country. I shall be back in an hour or two. Good-night, youngster ; good-night, Margaret."

Kissing his mother, he took up his hat from a side table, and without another word left the room.

As he passed the bachelors' hut on his way to the paddock, he noticed that one of the hands, a man named Keggs, whom they had only engaged a short time before, was leaning against the door-post smoking a short black pipe. He was not a prepossessing person, for his face, which was of an unwholesome pink, was deeply marked with small-pox, and his pale-coloured shifty eyes were inflamed-looking and unshaded by any eye-lashes. Alec had not liked the appearance of the man, but, thinking it a shame to be prejudiced by mere looks, he had engaged him, and, not knowing his capabilities, had employed him about the head station. He had several times noticed him prying into things with which he had no concern, but thinking the man was inquisitive he had said nothing. Alec observed that Keggs glanced keenly at him as he passed the hut, and turning round some little time afterwards he could see, by the light of the moon, that the man had followed him for a short distance to watch where he was going. When Keggs saw that he was observed, he turned and shrank back to the shadow of the hut.

Stepping out with the free, springy stride that

speaks of perfect health and muscular strength, Alec reached, in about half an hour, the squalid *gunyahs* that formed the camp of a few native families that were allowed to remain on the run. One or two naked, bushy-haired fellows were crouching over the hot embers of a wood fire, on which they were cooking great lumps of kangaroo or wallaby flesh. They sprang up in alarm and seized their heavy *nullah-nullahs* (clubs), which lay by their sides, when they heard Alec's quick footstep, which they did from a great distance, and in an instant were prepared for defence. But they knew Alec's voice directly he called out, and putting down their weapons they advanced to meet him. They aroused the old *gin*, Ippai, from her sleep, when Alec told them who it was he wished to see, and a moment afterwards she joined them at the fire, still wrapped in the opossum rug she had been lying in.

Sitting down on a log by the side of the fire, Alec was for the next hour deep in talk with the natives. They readily answered his questions, but it was difficult for him to arrive at the facts of the case, as the Australian aborigines have an entire disregard for the truth, and say anything that first enters their poor childish brains, and anything that they think will please their questioner. It was only by going over the same ground time after time, and with different members of the party, that Alec succeeded in sifting out the truth from what they told him.

At last, when the Southern Cross was high in the sky, he thought that he could learn nothing more from them, and rose to go. He arranged that two young men, Prince Tom and Murri, fine specimens of the aboriginal black native, should accompany

him. He knew them both as excellent guides and hunters, and, knowing their love of sport and wandering, he felt sure that they would keep their promise of being up at the head station before sunrise.

The night was very dark when he left the camp, for the moon had set, but he knew every inch of that part of the run, and could have found his way about with his eyes shut. The hard, dry earth was covered in all directions with sheep tracks, which looked like paths, and which would have puzzled any stranger; but Alec bore straight along over the little dry water-course that intersected his route in one place, and through the strips of scrub that lay between him and the house. He was thinking too deeply to notice the plaintive cry, like the wail of a child, of the little native bear in the great trees of the gully, or the howls of the dingoes that every now and then disturbed so weirdly the silence of the night. He saw the dim outlines of the horses move away into the darkness as he came across the paddock, and he could hear the quick sound of their cropping, but everything else was still.

As Alec lightly vaulted over the gate between the paddock and the yard, he violently struck against a man who was standing in the shadow of the cart-shed, and who had evidently stationed himself there to watch Alec's movements.

"What are you doing here?" said Alec, angrily, for his temper was not absolutely angelic, and it annoyed him beyond measure to be watched in this manner.

"I ain't a doin' nothink," answered Keggs, for it was he.

"And that is what you are generally doing all day

long, Keggs," said Alec, sharply; "so that you can always find time to spy after me and pry into our affairs. What I do, or what any one at the house does, is no business of yours, and I'll not stand your interference. I tell you plainly if I catch you at it again you go."

"I seed yer goin' towards the native camp, and I on'y wanted to know if you'd heerd anythink o' them missin' sheep."

"Yes, I have been to the camp, but what I did there is no business of yours," said Alec, haughtily, as he turned on his heel and walked to the house.

"Oh!" muttered the man to himself as Alec disappeared, "ain't it no bisnis of mine? Well, I've foun' out what I wanted to know. You hev' been to the camp, and I'll soon get out o' them niggers what you went for, my fine master," and knocking the ashes out of his dirty pipe he entered the hut.

The house was quite dark and quiet when Alec reached it, for a Queensland household, that is up before sunrise and works heartily all day, is generally ready to go to bed by nine or ten o'clock. Alec walked along the verandah till he reached the room that he and George occupied in common, and entering at the wide open window he found the match-box and struck a light.

The room was the boys' own den, and presented a very boy-like appearance. The walls were of the hardwood slabs of which the house was built, and on them were nailed several pictures from the illustrated papers that had struck the lads' fancy. Besides the two small bedsteads, a couple of rough chairs, and a sort of compound washing and dressing-table, there was no furniture, but on a rough shelf that ran along one wall,

and about the room in different places, was strewn a variety of articles that spoke of the habits of the occupants. On the two chests which held the boys' very limited wardrobe lay an old saddle in need of repairs, and a heap of odd straps and old bridles; in one corner of the room lay a pile of rusty bits, old stirrup irons, and horse-shoes; and from a nail on the door hung a great unfinished stock whip which George was plaiting.

Geordie was fast asleep when Alec came in, but he was a light sleeper, and sat up broad awake, but blinking in the candle light, before his brother had said a word.

"Well, Alec, what news?"

"Hush, don't speak so loud! Margaret's window is open as well as ours, and she may overhear us," said Alec, seating himself on the edge of Geordie's bed, and speaking in a voice that was low but with an excited tremor in it that betrayed the emotion that he felt. "The best of news. I believe we shall find the gold, though the labour will be enormous and the danger great."

"But neither of us minds that. Forewarned is forearmed, and we will be prepared. Did old Ippai remember the nugget?"

"She is not likely to readily forget it, considering that Black Harry nearly beat her head in when he lost it in a deep water-hole on the creek where he was spearing fish. She and Moolong, that white-haired old native down at the camp, both say that it came from the head of a great valley which they call Whanga. They say it lies in the midst of the mountains that are beyond the ranges we can see from the Yarrun station. You know that Stevens, that shep-

herd we once had, said that he had seen great blue-peaked mountains from the ranges when he went into them searching for that missing flock we never found. Don't you remember?"

"Yes; and we thought he had never been to the ranges at all, and was only 'blowing.'"

"It seems he wasn't, for all of them down at the *gunyahs*" (huts) "tell me the same story. It is rather difficult to make out their meaning, as you know, but, as far as I can understand, they say that Black Harry found the nugget in a sort of deep hole in the basin of a waterfall at the end of this Whanga valley."

"Did they tell you if Black Harry said there were any more?" asked George, in an eager whisper.

"I asked them that, and old Moolong said Harry told them that there was no more, but that he believed it was a lie, and that he only had said so that he might be the only one with such an ornament. If he had found more he would have had to distribute them among the tribe, as you know, and he did not want any one else to have such a necklace."

"There *is* more. I feel sure that there is more. Why should there be only one piece?" said George, seizing hold of Alec's arm with his burning hand. "Can we find the place though? Oh! Alec, it is too terrible to think that the gold which can save Wanda-roo is lying there and we unable to find it."

"But we can!" said Alec, in a thrilling whisper. "Murri, one of the two black boys I have engaged to go with us, went there once with a party of their tribe when he was quite a little chap. You know they never forget the road to a place they have once been to. He can take us to it straight enough if he will."

"Did that party find gold there?"

"No; a huge waterfall was pouring over the rocks, and the hole in which Black Harry had found the nugget was a foaming pool. They did not look anywhere else. They did not know the value that white men set upon gold; the nugget—'the heavy stone,' as they call it—was only a curious ornament to them, so they did not wait till the wet season was over, when probably the stream would be dried up."

"There hasn't been rain for months," said George meditatively, as though to himself.

"Not down here, but there may have been thunderstorms among the mountains. Don't let us set our hearts too much upon finding it."

"But I have."

"And so have I," confessed Alec, with a little dry, nervous laugh.

Poor lads! the gold fever was on them.

"Hasn't Murri or any of them ever been since?" asked Geordie, anxiously.

"No; they say that the *myalls*" (the wild and savage aborigines) "are very numerous and fierce about there, and that they are their deadly enemies."

"We must go well armed," said George, in a matter-of-fact voice, and as calmly as though he were a man of forty. "And now, Alec, old boy, put the dip out and tumble in. It is late, and we have an awful lot to do to-morrow before we start."

In a few minutes silence fell upon the room, and after tossing about restlessly for a short time the sound of regular and deep breathing from the boys' beds told that they were lost in the strange, dim land of dreams.

CHAPTER III.

PREPARATIONS FOR A START.

EVERY one was astir betimes next morning, for an unusual sense of excitement pervaded the whole household. Even Yesslett, who was generally late for everything, was up in good time, and, with his usual good-nature, lent every one a helping hand. His assistance was, however, often rendered useless from his ignorance of colonial life, for he had only been in Australia a month or two.

Yesslett Dudley was Mrs. Law's nephew, who, after the death of his father and the break-up of his old home in England, had been sent out by his guardians to Australia, as his health was not good, and his prospects little better. He was a curly-headed young rascal, with a smile that was like sunshine in a house, and a voice that rang with merriment and good humour. He was far wiser in book-learning than his boy cousins, but could not compare with them in anything else. It is true he could sit a horse and handle a gun, both after his own fashion, but his ludicrous riding and his dangerous shooting would have been subjects for constant ridicule to less kind fellows than his cousins. They could not help despising him a little as a "jackaroo" and a "new chum" just at first, but his pleasant hearty way of laughing at himself and his many mishaps soon won their hearts, and instead of making fun of him they began to teach him how to do things in a "true colonial

fashion," as they said, and that was their highest standard.

Under their able tuition he soon improved in the manly arts ; and as his health became better in the pure air of those lofty downs and with the simple life of the station, he not only began to grow stouter and stronger, but also became more courageous and manly. Not that Yesslett had ever been a coward, but his weak health had made him more timid and nervous than strong and hale boys generally are. He possessed an inexhaustible fund of good humour, and a capacity for fun and mischief which, fortunately, few boys are blessed with.

Alec's first thought as he left the house was to see whether the two native boys he had engaged the night before had kept their promise of coming to the station. There they were, sure enough, sitting by the strong rails of the stock-yard grinning and laughing and chattering away, and delighted at the prospect of the coming hunt, as they thought the expedition to be. These two men were strong, active fellows, and more to be trusted, perhaps, than the average native ; they were employed on the station at times during mustering and shearing, or when the run was short-handed. They could both ride like monkeys, and could speak a few words of queer pigeon English. Alec was glad to see them there, for without the help of Murri he knew they could never find the Whanga gully. He walked up to them and said—

"You go drive *yarroman*" (horses) "in um stock-yard."

"*Yohi*" (yes), "all um *yarroman* in um paddock?" asked Prince Tom.

"Yes, all the lot," answered Alec ; and the two

black fellows ran off to get to the other side of the horses and head them to the yard. Just as thoughtless as children they rushed away without thinking of opening the stock-yard rails ; but Alec had expected as much, and walking round the yard he removed the two heavy slip-panels himself, and stepped on one side out of sight of the horses. In a few moments he heard the heavy thud of hoofs on the dry turf as the little mob was driven from the paddock and came galloping towards him. One or two of the horses neighed loudly, resenting the ignominy of being driven by natives, but after some reluctance they turned to the yard and rushed through the opening in a little stampede.

How noble the handsome creatures looked ! Ten or a dozen of them, and not a single "screw" amongst them ; for it was Alec's pride, as it had been his father's before him, to have the best horses in the colony. They stood, quivering with the excitement of the little run, with the morning sun shining on their burnished coats, as spirited and in as good condition as horses well could be, though their only feed was the short sweet grass of the paddock. They all pricked their ears and looked up as Alec came round the cart-shed. They nearly all knew him, for he had broken in all the young horses himself for the last five years. As he came up to the fence, Amber, his favourite horse, which he allowed no one but himself to mount, pushed his way through the others, and with a low whinny of pleasure at the sight of his master, put his head over the top rail for Alec to rub his smooth soft muzzle.

He was a noble beast of a rich golden chestnut colour, and without a white hair or a blemish on him.

His goodly shoulders and grand hind-quarters showed the strength of the horse, and his flat hocks and springy though strong-thewed pasterns spoke of his swiftness as plainly as his broad chest did of his powers of endurance. His head, which was perhaps a trifle small, was exquisitely shaped, broad in the forehead, and clean cut. The nostrils were wide, the eyes dark and tender, and the ears sensitive and small. It could be seen by the whole shape of the head, and by the slight arch in the curve of his tail, that Arab blood flowed in his veins. No wonder that Alec loved him, for Amber was as noble and intelligent a creature as ever man bestrode.

Whilst Alec and the native boys were seeing to the horses, George was carrying out his arrangements in the store. He finished weighing out the week's rations for the shepherds on the distant parts of the run, and put them ready for Yesslett, who was to act as ration-carrier in his absence, to take to them that afternoon. He then called Dudley into the store and showed him where everything was kept, and told him to enter every article he sold to any of the men, or their wives, in the store book to each man's account, and showed him the board on which the price of everything was written.

"For you will have to be store-keeper as well as ration-carrier whilst I am away, besides being protector-in-chief to mother and Margaret. I wish you were coming, too, Yess, but I don't think you could stand camping out just yet," said George.

"No," replied Yesslett; "perhaps I could not, and besides that," he added, with an assumption of a manly manner that delighted and amused George, though he was little more than a year older than

his cousin—"besides that, I shall have to look after the women."

"Yes, of course," said George, with a little smile. "I say, Geordie," said Yesslett, in his natural, boyish, inquisitive way a few moments afterwards, during which time George had been getting ready the stores to take with them on their expedition, "whatever do you want all those canvas bags for?"

"Oh, they'll come in useful," said George, who did not mean to tell his chatterbox of a cousin that he hoped they would be useful for bringing home the gold they were going to seek. He half blushed at thus counting his chickens before they were hatched, but with a little laugh he went on choosing the strongest sewn ones from a little heap of 14-lb. shot bags that lay in a corner of the store near the door.

Yesslett understood that he would get no further answer from George, so he remained behind the tall salt-meat cask, silently folding up the great flour bag they had just emptied.

The same idea seemed to strike some one else, for a moment afterwards Keggs, who had already made one or two excuses for coming into the store that morning, appeared again at the door, and looking in, with what he considered an engaging smile, he entered, and said—

"You seem mighty busy this morning!"

"Yes," said George, shortly, for he did not like the man, and Alec had told him how he had been watching him the night before.

"And wot might y' all be ser busy for?"

"Because we've got something to do, and can't afford to waste time as you do," said George, looking up at him.

"P'raps you wouldn't mind sayin' wot all them little bags is for?"

"To put things in—like this," said a deep voice from above him; and before the astonished man could look up, Yesslett, holding the mouth of the sack wide open, had leaped down on him from the top of the salt-meat tub, and enveloped him completely in the rough dusty bag.

They could hear him choking and coughing and cursing as he struggled to get out. Before he had succeeded in extricating himself, Yesslett, with a most provoking and impish laugh, had vanished into the house. Keggs' inflamed eyelids looked redder and more painful than ever from his white powdered face when at last he had wriggled out of the sack, for George would not help him; and as he sneaked off he swore that he would "serve the young beggar out."

Breakfast at Wandaroo was taken, as is general on Queensland runs, at about half-past seven or eight, when every one had gained an appetite by the couple of hours' work he had done since sunrise. It was not a particularly cheerful meal that morning, for Mrs. Law felt losing her sons for so long a time, and the lads were too excited and busy to talk very much. Fortunately Yesslett was in capital spirits, as indeed he generally was, and Macleod, the general manager, was too old and too hard-headed a man of the world to let so small a circumstance disturb him. Although fond of the lads, he had known too many partings in his lifetime to allow this one, which after all was not for so very long a time, interfere with his breakfast.

"I hope you will be at the head station as much as possible whilst we are away," said Alec. address-

ing Macleod. "The South Creek station doesn't want so much looking after now, and I shall feel more comfortable if I know you are here."

"Oh, aye, Alec, I s'all be heere," said the old Scotsman. "Yasslutt and I can ferry weel look after the leddies."

"Don't trouble yourselves about us," said Margaret; "we shall get on all right, there is nothing to be afraid of, for Starlight and his band are nowhere in the neighbourhood, and they are the only people we have to fear."

"How do you know that they are not about here?"

"Macleod brought the news up from Bateman that they have been seen lately about Bowen, and that they 'stuck up' a bank manager in one of the new townships near there in his own house, took his keys, emptied his safe, and rode off scot free, though it was broad daylight and the town was full of men."

"By Jove! Margaret, I almost believe you admire those sneaking bushrangers," said George.

"Oh, no, I don't," replied she, blushing a little at the accusation; "but I do think them bold and daring, and I can't help rather liking their dash and pluck."

"Weel, Miss Mairgaret, theer's not much chaance o' their comin' to Wandaroo," said old Macleod, in his caustic Scottish way, "so I greatly fear you will not haive the pleasure o' witnessin' 'the pluck and daring' of ten weel armed and mounted men slinking on to a defenceless station and robbing a pack o' women and lads o' their little a'. Theer's nothing at Wandaroo to tempt bushrangers heether."

"Except the horses," muttered Alec.

"And we shall have the best of them with us," said George, turning to his brother, for he had heard him, as he always did anything that Alec said.

"Well, it's about time we started," said Alec, when breakfast was over; "it will be getting fearfully hot directly, and we may as well spare the horses as much as possible at first."

"Have you taken enough stores for a month for all of you?" asked Mrs. Law, anxiously. "Those black boys eat such an enormous quantity."

"All right, mother, I've seen to that," said Geordie. "We shall take two pack-horses, and I've looked out everything and loaded them well. As to Murri and Prince Tom, they will have to pretty well feed themselves—there is plenty of kangaroo and wallaby and bandicoot for them to catch and eat; we shall take Como, too, and he'll help us get food enough, don't fear."

"I hope you are going well armed," said Margaret the practical. "Take plenty of powder and shot."

"Thank you, madame, we will, and ball, too. Being so young and inexperienced in bush life," said Alec, with a laugh at his sister's advice, "we should probably have forgotten all about these trifles."

"What do you want ball for, Alec?"

"Possibly for natives, my gentle sister," whispered Alec to her, "if they are unkind enough and unwise enough to interfere with us. But we shall take care of ourselves, never fear. Don't let mother know that we think we may meet any *myalls*, she does so worry herself."

Shortly after this, having strapped up in their blankets the very few clothes they were taking with them, they said good-bye to their mother as cheerfully as possible, and went out to the yard. The horses, which had been saddled, although fresh and excited, stood quite quietly, as they had been trained to do when fastened to a post or rail, and the two spare horses were loaded with the provisions, the one or two tin pans and "billies," as the round pots for boiling water are called, and the two boys' "swags." Prince Tom and Murri were already mounted, their bare legs looking very ridiculous coming from under the old torn shirt that each of them wore. They were both armed to the teeth with native weapons, for in their belts of kangaroo sinew were thrust their *nullah-nullahs*, and *waddies* (clubs), their short throwing sticks, and their most valued weapon, the *boomerang*. Each man had his native stone hatchet fixed in his belt and lying along his spine, and they carried, too, a few short spears strapped on to their saddles, and over which their left legs passed. Kissing Margaret, who had come on to the verandah to see them start, and shaking hands with Yesslett and Macleod, the boys unfastened their horses and sprang into the saddle with the perfect ease of accomplished horsemen.

It was a beautiful sight to see those boys ride; never did their graceful, well-knit figures show to such advantage as on horseback. Accustomed to riding from their earliest childhood, they sat a horse as though it were—as it surely must be—the most natural place for a man to be. Once in the saddle they seemed to be actually part of the animal they rode, their swelling thighs and muscular calves

clasping the horse firmly and composedly, but the whole body above the hips swaying and giving easily to every motion of the horse. They looked two as handsome lads as could well be seen as they rode out of the yard that morning. Their dark eyes were flashing and their healthy brown faces were all aglow with excitement, and they laughed aloud, as their horses pranced proudly beneath them, from sheer joy in the beauty of the sunshine and the brightness of the day.

They turned, as they came to the gate of the paddock, and taking off their soft, grey, broad-brimmed felt hats they waved a farewell to the group on the verandah. The sun gleamed on the short curls of their hair, and shone on the bright barrels of their guns and on the steel of their bridles and stirrups as they shouted a cheery "good-bye."

Everything was bright and promised well. So they left on their wild search for gold.

"Ah, good-bye, good-bye, my fine fellers," maliciously muttered Keggs, who had been watching them with his blinking treacherous eyes from the door of the bachelors' hut, where he was hidden in the shadow. "Better men nor you are a-walkin' now who may be in your saddles afore long."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST STAGES

UNCONSCIOUS of the evil glances and still more evil wishes of the man hidden in the bachelors' hut, the boys rode on. They were happy, for hope was strong in their hearts; the day was clear and invigorating, for the sun had not gained much power as yet, though he shone royally from a sky of cloudless blue; they were strong and well; the horses they rode were fresh and powerful; and the feeling that at last they were started on just such an adventure as all their lives they had both wished for, gave a zest to life that they had never before experienced. Could any one wish for more than this?

It was a day to put the most miserable of men in high spirits, and it can hardly be said that Alec and George were of that nature. Up on those wide, open downs the air is clear and strong; a pleasant breeze from the eastern sea blew on their faces and cooled their sun-tanned necks, from which the loose unbuttoned collars of their flannel shirts fell back. The keen, sweet smell of the wild marjoram rose from the ground as their horse's hoofs crushed it as they rode along, and the "chirr" of the crickets and the locusts in the ti-scrub made a cheerful, though unobserved, music in their accustomed ears.

For many miles they would be riding over their

own land, for the run was one of those huge tracts of country that were taken up by the pioneer squatters in the early years of the settlement of that part of the colony, and of course the boys knew their way about it better than the natives did, so they led the way, and the black boys followed, leading the spare horses.

Como, the great tawny kangaroo hound, bounded along by the side of George's horse, the pace being an easy one to his enormous stride, every now and then turning aside to examine with inquisitive nose the traces of kangaroo that had passed thereby. He was a splendid hound, standing, when he put his great paws on George's shoulders, some inches taller than his master himself.

For some few miles the country was open and park-like, dotted here and there with clumps of great gum trees, between whose ragged trunks they could easily ride, as no brushwood grows in their shade, and every now and then it was varied with strips and patches of scrub and wild impenetrable bush. Much of the land had been cleared by firing, and the gaunt skeletons of the burnt trees stood up here and there, stretching their bare arms towards heaven, as though protesting against their fate. They had been following, until now, the slight track that had gradually been formed by the horses passing between the head station and the hut on the Yarrun station, where two of the Wandaroo shepherds lived. But where the track turned aside and crossed the deep gully, on the other side of which, at some little distance, the Yarrun hut stood, Alec called a halt.

"Over yonder," said he, pointing to a low line of dim blue hills that lay along the horizon to the north-

east, "lie the ranges from which we may perhaps see the first spurs of those great mountains we are looking for. It was from those hills that Stevens said he had seen mountain peaks in the far-distant north. He might have been lying, probably was, for he was an awful liar, but Murri and the other boys also say that the mountains are there. It is no use our making a rush at the hills, and perhaps going over the highest part of all. We may as well strike a valley, if there be one, and save both time and our horses; so we will stop a minute to let the boys catch us up, and ask them."

"Now, then, let's ask Murri or Prince Tom," said George, as the other horses came up.

Alec turned in his saddle, and, resting one hand affectionately on Amber's glossy back, he asked Murri his opinion as to which was the best road across the ranges.

"High up *boudgerree cawbawn*" (much best) "for um black fellow, 'cause black fellow walk and kangaroo there; low down *boudgerree*" (good) "for white fellows, 'cause um *yarroman*" (because of the horses).

"You know um road low down, Murri?"

"*Yohi*. Mine been along o' that place plenty time, *bail gammon bong*. Mine go first; white fellow follow 'long o' me." (Yes, I have been to that place many times. No gammon. I will go first, you follow after me.)

From this point the country was new to the two lads, and they had to get Murri to point out to them the direction in which they should go. With that incomprehensible instinct which the Australian savage possesses in such perfection, Murri knew the best road to be taken, and pointed to a slight rise in the ground a few miles ahead, and said—

“Along o’ that place first.”

By the time that they reached the little hill towards which Murri had directed them the day had grown terribly hot, for the power of the sun at mid-day in Queensland is very trying. Wandaroo was well within the Tropics, being in about the same latitude as Bowen, but a little to the north of it. The black boys, of course, did not feel the heat, and Alec and George, being naturalised to it, were not affected much; but the horses suffered a great deal, both from the sun and the countless flies.

Prince Tom knew of a spring in a little shady ravine on the far side of the hill, and when they had “rose the ridge” they saw the welcome signs of water below them. Thither they led the horses, and after they had filled their “billies” for the tea, which is the bushman’s constant beverage, they allowed the thirsty brutes to drink a little. As they had made a very good stage since morning, having crossed the vaguely defined limits of their own run, and entered upon the vast crown lands which, at present, were only inhabited by the *myalls*, they determined to halt for a spell.

The riding horses were unsaddled, and the two spare horses unloaded, and then, having their fore feet “hobbled,” they were turned loose to graze and pick up their living as best they might. A horse hobble is a short length of chain (the wilder the horse, the fewer the links), which is fastened by two straps to the fore legs of a horse, so that, although he is free to wander about and graze, he is quite unable to escape very far. Some very clever and agile horses can manage to shuffle off to a great distance, and they have been known to leap the tall fences of a paddock with their hocks thus coupled together.

Although an Australian horse can find sustenance where an English one would starve, Alec's chief anxiety was the keep of his little troop. It was totally impossible to carry fodder for so many horses, and he feared that in the great dreary stretch of spinifex-covered desert that the black boys said he would have to cross his horses would starve. However, though he was not without foresight, he was not of that desponding nature which lets the possibility of future ills blight the pleasant present ; so he opened one of the parcels of tea, and cheerfully threw in a pinch or two, "and one for the pot," and, backing away from the hot little fire, he flung himself down in the shade of a few grey-leaved acacia shrubs, and waited till the tea "corroborreed," as he called boiling.

Whilst the boys waited for the tea to boil, Prince Tom and Murri wandered away to pick up any little bush delicacy in the way of food that they might discover. The one idea of an Australian black is "food" and "the getting of food," and the amount they will consume at one sitting, of flesh or anything else eatable, is incredible. They will eat till they can literally take no more, and then will lie on their backs till the effect of the gorge has passed off, when they will rise and, if they can get it, begin over again, smiling.

In a short time they heard a great creaking and cracking, and, looking down the little hillside, saw Murri swaying and wriggling a smallish green tree, and exerting himself mightily over it. Presently the brown rotten roots gave way, and the little tree fell with a crash. In the decaying wood was a mass of fat, white, struggling grubs. They saw Murri pick out a number, and scoop them up in his hollowed

hands ; then he came rushing up to the place where George was sitting in the little gully.

"Missa Law, mine find *bardee*. You *patter*" (eat) "all ob um. *Bardee boudgerie cawbawn*." (Grubs are very good.)

As Murri could not pronounce George's name, he always called him "Missa Law." Alec, on the contrary, he always addressed by his Christian name, as he had no difficulty in saying it.

George took two or three of the grubs, and placed them in the hot ashes of the fire, for they are really most excellent when roasted in this way. The blacks always prefer to eat theirs uncooked. It was a very extraordinary thing that Murri should have given him any, for as a rule the natives are not generous, and they rarely give anything away. But Murri was an exceptionally fine specimen of the Australian savage, possessing many of those higher qualities as to which many travellers accuse them of being absolutely deficient.

It is often said that the aborigines are entirely treacherous and wanting in a sense of gratitude, and this, it must be admitted, is true as a general rule. But to this rule, as to all, there are some exceptions, and Murri was a case in point. Some months before this George had had occasion to go to the native camp to hire a boy or two to help in driving in a little mob of cattle from one of the outer stations. He had seen Murri, wrapped in his possum rug, lying by the side of a huge fire, and groaning and writhing with pain. One of the old *gins*, who was crouching by the side of him, said that he was bewitched, and that he would die very soon, and evidently believed the truth of what she said so firmly that she thought it useless to do anything to

help the invalid, and in consequence only sat groaning and howling over him. George had always rather liked this man Murri, who was more intelligent than any of the other men at the camp, so he looked at him, and thought that there was nothing more the matter with him than a good strong dose of medicine would cure; he therefore rode back to the station, and procured a powerful but simple remedy, which he administered straightway to him.

That night George returned to the camp to see how the invalid was progressing, and found the dying man restored to perfect health, and walking about and chattering as usual. Since that time Murri had been his sworn ally and bondsman, and seemed to have conceived a strong attachment to the young white man.

Towards evening, when the power of the declining sun had grown less, Alec said that they had better push on; so the horses were caught and re-saddled, and the little cavalcade rode on till after sunset. They camped that night at the edge of a great dark forest, where the giant trees were all tangled together by a wild luxuriance of tropical creepers and vines. Its deep shades, that had never been desecrated by the foot of man, looked dark and awful, and the leaves of the trees, languid after the heat of the burning day, were motionless and silent in the stilly air. Not a breath of wind was stirring, and the atmosphere seemed still quivering with the heat radiated from the baking earth. But the coolness of the night was at hand, and the heavy dews, that would refresh all living things, were yet to fall.

The little party had made good progress since the morning, for they had ridden fast and well, the open

nature of the country, for that first day's journey, at least, having offered no bar to their progress. The range of hills, which was the first point to be reached in their journey, seemed in the clear, warm light before sunset to loom quite close upon them, and they felt confident of getting well in amongst them before very late next day.

That night they slept the sleep of the weary, with their heads upon their saddles and covered with their blankets.

Their loaded guns they laid beside them, and carefully covered them with their blankets, that the heavy dew might not spoil their cartridges. Many a time has a man sprung up from sleep when attacked by *myalls*, and found to his consternation that he could not fire his gun, and all because he had not taken the simple precaution of keeping his loaded weapon covered from the damp.

It was not the first night by many a one that the two lads had camped out, but still they had not lost all sense of novelty in doing so, and the excitement of their position and the unaccustomed hardness of their beds awoke them once or twice. But neither of them was foolish enough to waste valuable time in lying awake, and after a little surprised thought at the horsey smell of their leather pillows and an upward glance at the deep clear blue of the vast starry heaven stretched above them, they would pull their rough blanket closer about them—for even tropical nights are cold when the dews are falling—and with a little shake or two to settle themselves in their places they would roll off to sleep again.

CHAPTER V.

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP.

THE journey next day was hotter and more oppressive than the first, for their way led them, in several places, through thick and tangled forest, where the luxuriant undergrowth was so matted and wild that they could not force their way without the greatest labour and loss of time. Here again Murri's knowledge of the country was of the greatest service, for he knew that there was a river thereabouts, which flowed from the ranges, along the dry bed of which they could travel. It was a poor road when he found it, for the sand was very deep in some places and it was so rocky in others, that their horses had no small difficulty in picking a road. It was, however, much easier to travel thus than to be obliged to chop and hew their way through the vine-bound thickets of the bush.

Although they had passed all their lives in Queensland, the boys had never seen such majestic forest as clothed, for the most part, the tops of the banks of this creek, for all the bush within many miles of any European settlements or stations is so frequently the scene of fires, both accidental and intentional, that either it is totally destroyed or its wild beauty is greatly spoiled. Here, it seemed, no devastating flames had ever impaired the grandeur of the primeval forest. The giant trees, of vast age and enormous girth, were bound together by loops and ropes of

creepers ; every branch and stem was covered with quantities of strange parasitical growths and ferns, and the dead and dying branches of the trees were clothed and draped with hanging masses of grey moss. Every now and then a rotten branch would fall with a crash, startling, with wild echoes, the silence of the bush.

In every cranny of the rocky sides of the ravine some green thing grew, a cluster of drooping ferns or tall rich grasses, and here and there a tapering palm raised its rose of leaves upon the slender column of its graceful stem. About the trees in the golden heat, or in the cool recesses of their shadowy branches, flew flocks of parroquets of every gorgeous hue ; bright green and crimson, amethyst and amber, they flashed as they darted hither and thither, with the sunshine gleaming on every burnished feather, till they glowed like living jewels. The cooing of the many sorts of pigeons hidden in the woods, the clear resonant note of the bell bird, and every now and again the grand, pure song of the golden-throated organ magpie made sweet music for them as they rode along.

But, although the beauty around them was so great, the heat was terribly trying in the deep bed of that dry river, and not a drop of water was to be found in the rock pools along the course of the stream.

"I don't know how you feel, Alec," George said, after they had been riding several hours in this blazing heat, "but I am completely parched. My clothes would be wet through with sweat if the sun didn't dry 'em just as quick. I don't believe there's a blessed drop of moisture left in my whole body."

"Beastly, isn't it ? I say, Geordie, what fools we

were not to have brought some water with us from last night's camp."

"So we should, only that ass of a Prince Tom said we were sure to get plenty in the water holes in the river. River! I call it a jolly old sand pit."

"Well, Murri says we are sure to get some at the place he recommends us to stop at. There is a native well there."

"I hope there is."

Shortly after this Murri overtook them, and said that at the next bend in the river was the place they ought to stay at, as, at this dry season, there was no water beyond that for many miles. So at the place indicated—it was at the junction to the main creek of what, in flood times, would be a freshet, but what was then a dry and rocky little watercourse—they dismounted and unsaddled their horses. They at once followed Murri to the place where he remembered the native well was situated, and found, to their intense disappointment, that it was absolutely dry. There were many traces of blacks on the sand around the well, and traces which both Murri and Prince Tom said were quite recent ones, and if there had been any water there at all, which was doubtful, they had consumed it every drop.

The disappointment was all the keener as they had looked forward with such certainty to finding water there. Still they were in no great straits for it at present, although very thirsty and parched.

"What shall we do? Push on to the next camp?" said George.

"Oh, no, we must put up with it; we can manage to do without drink for a long time yet, and the horses

must rest. We must not knock them up whatever else we do."

"All right, I can manage if you can, old fellow. I was thinking of Como more than myself," said the boy, looking down at his dog, who was thrusting his dry, hot nose into his master's hand as though to tell him how much he suffered. "Never mind, Como, old boy, you shall have as much to drink as you like to-night."

So without any useless grumblings they threw themselves down in the shade and kept themselves as quiet and still as the plague of flies would let them. Just then Alec noticed that Prince Tom had not unloaded the pack-horse which had been given into his charge, though he had hobbled her and turned her loose. This was a most absurd and annoying thing to do, as not only was the mare greatly impeded in her feeding, but the pack upon her back was every moment threatened with destruction amongst the rocks and boughs that overhung the sides of the gully. Alec, whose temper was always rather a quick and hasty one, had been a good deal ruffled that day by one or two little signs of Prince Tom's desire to shirk his share of the work, and the heat, and the flies, and the want of water, too, had worried him considerably, so that it is not to be wondered at that he was angry. He jumped up hastily when he saw how Prince Tom had neglected Polly, and caught the skulking fellow—who was leaning against a tree close to him eating a lump of damper—a sounding box on the ears. He was very angry, and the black could see it.

"What for you leave um load on um *yarrowman*?" said Alec, advancing towards him as though he would repeat the blow.

Prince Tom danced and leaped backwards with surprising agility to get out of his way.

"Black fellow werry tired," he answered, sulkily. "Bail water bong, bail work" (no water, no work). "White fellow eat an' drinkee all um day. White fellow strong. You go take pack off *jarroman*."

Alec could hardly help laughing at the impudence of the fellow making such an absurd statement, but he sternly bade him go and unload the horse, and Prince Tom shuffled off and did it. Already several times since they had left Wandaroo Alec had thought that Tom had shown signs of insubordination and disobedience, whilst Murri, on the contrary, cheerfully obeyed their bidding, and did everything that he could to assist them. The fact that Prince Tom was so much less to be trusted than Murri may be accounted for by the fact that Tom was a partly civilised black, having lived about Wandaroo and other stations for some years, whilst Murri had not very long been drafted into the native camp on the station from the wild *myall* part of his tribe, which hunted in the immediate neighbourhood of Wandaroo.

All that afternoon, whilst they rested thirstily by the dried-up native well, Tom relieved his anger by singing *corroborree* songs to himself in a low voice, but with flashing eyes and an excited manner. An Australian savage comforts himself with these wild chants at all times of trouble or anger, and as they are short, and are repeated over and over again, perhaps hundreds of times, and as the tune is but a few harsh notes strung together, the effect upon a listener, who is not also a native Australian, becomes exasperating in the extreme.

This is what Prince Tom sang for hours and hours that day :—

*“ Marra boor-ba, boor-ba nunga,
Marra gul-ga, gul-ga nunga,
Marra boor-ba, boor-ba nunga,
Marra gul-ga, gul-ga nunga.”*

He sang another one just at first, when he felt very angry with Alec, and doubtless it was a great consolation to him, for all the opprobrious terms in it were meant as descriptive of the elder Law :—

*“ The wooden-headed,
Bandy-legged,
Thin-thighed fellow.
The long-armed
Long-shinned,
Thin-thighed fellow.”*

And then every now and then, with a sort of scornful laugh, he would add—

*“ Mat-ta, mat-ta, yungore bya,
Mat-ta, mat-ta, yungore bya.”*

“ Oh, what legs, oh, what legs, the kangaroo-like fellow,
Oh, what legs, oh, what legs, the kangaroo-like fellow.”

This singing did not trouble the boys much ; they made Tom move off to a distance, and then the sound of his chanting only made them feel drowsy in the hot afternoon air, and in the shade of the thick bushes they slept till it was time to push on to their camping-place for the night.

They noticed many signs of natives being in the neighbourhood, their steps in the sand and the remains of their fires, but Murri said that the party had gone off towards the west, probably in search

of water, as the water holes in that creek were all dried up.

By sunset they were well amongst the hills of the ranges they had been aiming for. They had left the bed of the river soon after they had started again in the afternoon. The country had grown much wilder, there was less bush about it, and the hills themselves were only covered with coarse native grasses, and ti-scrub and *mulga*. They camped that night in a rocky ravine, on either side of which the steep hills rose to a little height, leaving only a broad strip of sky above them. Here they were able to drink—their selves and their thirsting animals—for they found a native well which, when they had scraped out the accumulations of sand that had drifted into it, gave them a little supply of water.

That night the boys lay down with their loaded rifles by the side of them. They knew that strange blacks were in the neighbourhood, and although they had not caught sight of them, the keen-eyed savages, as Murri warned them, might have espied them and might make a raid upon their little force for the sake of the horses and the provisions they carried.

Alec thought it wisest that they should keep a watch through the night, and this was done. George took the first, Murri the second, Tom the third, and Alec himself was to watch from about half-past two till dawn.

All went well during the first part of the night. Geordie called Murri at the appointed time, and reported everything quiet, and so it continued through Murri's watch. He roused Prince Tom, who rose with an alacrity that surprised him, and lying down he was soon sound asleep.

No sooner had Prince Tom's quick ears told him that Murri slept than he rose from the side of the tree where he was crouching, and slowly, and noiselessly as a shadow, moved to where Alec and George were lying side by side. He made not the least sound as he stepped; each naked foot fell upon the dry soft sand as quietly as a falling leaf upon the grass. He stood behind them, stiff and motionless as a statue, and listened to their breathing to judge whether they slept soundly. He held his cruel *waddy* (club) in his hand. Would he murder them? Was he about to revenge himself on Alec thus?

It was well for them that the thought of it never entered his childish, savage brain. He would have killed them ruthlessly had the idea but presented itself to him; but that was not his intention. George rolls over and indistinctly mutters something; the savage grasps his murderous weapon that is half raised for the blow. Lie still, Geordie, *lie still*. But the boy does not wake, he only moves his head upon his saddle-flap and sinks again to deeper slumber.

Having assured himself that all are soundly sleeping, Prince Tom glides silently away; he goes to the little heap that the loads of the two pack-horses make, and with quick hands begins to turn the different sacks and parcels over. Many a backward glance he flings over his shoulder to where the sleeping boys lie. But they do not move. He hastily takes the bags that hold the flour and sugar and rice, and swiftly carries them a little way down the ravine, towards the place where he can hear the cropping of the horses. Once more he comes back and takes another load, of which his saddle and bridle form part, depositing it with the first

Wake, Alec! Wake, George! Treachery and robbery are going on. Wake up, wake up! But they lie still as death, unconscious of all that goes on so near them.

No sooner has Prince Tom taken as much as he thinks one horse can carry, and rather more, than he steals away to where the horses are feeding. He can only see them very indistinctly, for a pale, blue mist hangs above the damp, sour ground—it is an impassable swamp in the wet season—where they are feeding, but his quick ears guide him, and he hurries rapidly towards them. He thinks he will take Amber, for he knows how Alec values him, and it will be sweet to be revenged. He creeps up quite close to the animal, and is stretching out his hand to seize his forelock, when the horse perceives him and turns sharply round. Amber always hates the black boys, and never has let one touch him, and he thinks it cannot, under the circumstances, be wrong to bestow a gentle kick upon this one. Like a wise animal he acts upon what he thinks right, and lifting up his heels as quick as thought, he catches Tom such a kick upon the shin of one of his legs as would have disabled any one less hardy than a savage. As it is he suffers intensely, but silently, and hobbles off towards the horse he has been riding, which he catches without much difficulty. Saddling the creature, and securing his booty of food, over which he gloats with the gaze of a miser, he quickly mounts and rides slowly away. He walks his horse at first that the sound of hurried footsteps may not arouse the sleeping men, and enters the thin, blue sea of mist slowly, like a dusky vision, but he quickens his pace as he leaves the camp behind, and soon vanishes in the

pale clouds of vapour that lie along the bottom of the valley.

The night wears away apace, and at last, when Alec awakes, the dawn is close upon them. He feels chilly and shudders, and looking up he sees that the night has almost gone. He soon remembers that he ought to have been called for his watch, but as he sees George by his side he thinks that nothing more is amiss than that Tom has fallen asleep at his post and has not called him, as he should have done, three hours or so ago. He jumps up and looks round, and directly that his glance falls upon the little tumbled heap of provisions he knows what has happened.

"Geordie, Geordie, wake up!" he cries.

"Well, what is it? Good morning," says George, as cheerfully as anything, and waking up at once, as wide awake as possible, like a bird.

"Oh, only that all our provisions are gone in the night, and that dirty black thief, Tom, with them."

"Nonsense!"

But so it is. It is only too plain, for when they all three—for Murri has joined them, looking the picture of fright, and thinking that he will be punished for Prince Tom's fault—come to examine the remaining part of the two spare horses' loads they find very little remaining. It is principally flour that Tom has taken, the very thing of all others that they chiefly require; he has left them one bag of it, one parcel of rice, all the tea and some sugar, and some tins of American salmon. All the things that they might manage to do without he has generously left behind, and those to which they trusted for their stay in the mountains he has taken!

Murri was most anxious that they should follow

Tom ; he said that it would be quite easy for him to track him, and that they would in all probability catch him in the course of the day.

"Mine can *mil-mil*" (I can see) "where him go. You soon cotch along o' black fellow. Um *jarroman* go slow, plenty much heavy on um back. Missa Law chewt him with um riple" (rifle); "Prince Tom fall dead bong ;" and here Murri slapped his naked thigh and laughed with delight at the thought.

"We can't do that," said George, "it would only be wasting time, for he has a four hours' start of us, and would take good care we didn't come up with him."

"We must go back, of course," said Alec, with a hard tone in his voice which told how much it cost him to say the words.

"Go back ! not we indeed," said George, laying his arm about his brother's shoulders, and looking at him with such a cheering smile on his winsome face as would have inspirited the most desponding.

"It is not for myself, lad, but for you. I would go on if I hadn't a crumb of bread or an ounce of flour," said he, with his old determination ; "but I promised mother that I would look after you, and I will."

"Look after me, of course you will, and I after you, you jolly old goose ; but go back, *I shan't*. You may if you like. I shall go on with Murri. I am not afraid."

"Do you mean it ?" said Alec, eagerly, and with a glad light once more shining in his eye. "Yes, you do, I see. You are a good plucked one, Geordie. We *will* go on !"

"You white fellow *patter*" (eat) "kangaroo and potchum and wallaby ?" here suddenly asked Murri, who

had been listening intently and trying to understand what they were saying.

"*Yohi*, Murri, possum and wallaby, eat um all," said George, laughing, "or any other blessed thing you can catch us, old man," he added.

"No go back then," said Murri, grinning and nodding his head like a mandarin; "plenty much kangaroo all along o' that place. Mine can catch um. Prince Tom him *debbil-debbil*; him go find *myall* in bush, him no go back Wandaroo."

This was a danger that the boys had not thought of, for if Tom managed to join any of the wild tribes thereabouts, as seemed the most probable thing for him to do, they would very quickly consume all the provisions he had stolen, and would want to possess themselves of all that the boys still had with them. Alec saw this at once, and determined to hasten on and endeavour by forced marches to put such a distance between them as would prevent any possibility of their being overtaken.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT WITH THE MYALLS.

THE little party made a very sparing breakfast that morning, as Alec said they would have to place themselves on half rations of flour, and trust to their guns and Murri's hunting for the rest of their food. George shot a white cockatoo, of which they made a hasty broil, and Murri caught a little mottled snake amongst the stones, which he quickly cooked and ate.

They were ready to break camp almost before the light mist had been melted by the first rays of the sun. The morning was bright, and the dew-drops that covered the short spare grass or hung on the leaves of the stunted bushes that grew amongst the rocks gleamed like diamonds as they trembled in the crisp morning air. The horses were fresh, for they had found good feed on the little dried-up marsh, and the whole day was cheery with the morning songs of the birds and the sounds of life that proceeded from all living things that rejoiced in the early glory of the day.

Although the boys had suffered such a loss in the night they were not desponding; it had made their undertaking more difficult, but it had not rendered it impossible, and their spirits only rose the higher at the thought of greater obstacles to be overcome. They still had forty pounds of flour and about ten of rice, and George, who was head of the commissariat department said that, with very careful management,

and by eating plenty of kangaroo or other flesh, it ought to last them five or six weeks, and they did not expect to be away more than a month in all.

Busy with these calculations and full of talk as to what had become of Prince Tom and the horse he had stolen, and as to whether the box on the ears Alec had given him the day before had been the cause of his deserting them in this shameful manner, they rode along for some few hours. The valley amongst the hills, along which they had been riding since they had entered the ranges the evening before, was not only very winding but very varying in shape as well. The place where they had camped the night before, and from which Prince Tom had deserted them, was a mere rocky defile, with the hills close on either hand. The valley had widened out shortly after leaving this place, and they had been able to travel a little quicker; but now that they began to approach the other end of the pass it gradually narrowed again till the rocks on either side almost met overhead, making the defile shadowy and dark.

Murri had told them that when they emerged from the rocks they would be able to see the great mountains beyond, and the boys were eagerly looking forward to seeing the land of promise which they hoped would prove such an El Dorado for them. They were talking of the gold they would find, and were laughing excitedly at the thought of so soon seeing the mountains, forgetful of all the difficulties that still lay between them and the far-off peaks, for the glamour of gold was upon them, and their imaginations were dazzled with the dreams which they themselves had conjured up. They had touched

their horses with the spur, and the animals were just breaking into a canter, for the sandy ground was clear just there, when Murri, who was close behind them, leading the pack-horses, called out to them in a voice which, although low, was so eager and earnest that the boys almost unconsciously obeyed it.

“Stop, stop!”

They pulled their horses up dead and turned round, Alec's hand instinctively falling on the lock of his rifle, which he carried slung at his back, for he was instantly aware, from the tone of Murri's voice, that some near danger threatened them.

“What is it?” he asked, in the same low tone.

“You no *mil-mil*” (see)? “Black fellow go aiong o' this place, two, four minutes ago. Um come down along o' that gully. Lookee, there um footmark,” said he, pointing to a number of traces on the shingly sand that the boys had not noticed. “And there,” he added, suddenly, his voice growing hoarse with the intensity of his excitement, “there footmark o' *yarroman*. That Dandy, mine *pitnce*” (I know). “Prince Tom, him with *myalls*.”

This sudden announcement of their danger made the boys' hearts beat high, and for a moment sent the strong blood surging in their ears. They well knew what it meant. As they had thought possible, Tom had succeeded in joining one of the numerous tribes of savages wandering about the neighbourhood, and, telling them of the prey, had led them to this narrow gorge, which he knew the lads must pass through. But there was not an ounce of coward in either of the boys, and in a moment both of them were ready for any emergency.

Alec's voice was steady, though his face was pale,

when, through his closed teeth, he said, without turning to his brother, but keeping a steady glance ahead—

“Geordie, is your rifle loaded as well as your revolver?”

“Yes, both barrels.”

“Fix your reins round the D-iron on the pommel, so as to have both hands free. Will Firebrace be guided by the knees?”

“Yes, as well as Amber. Let us try to get to that great rock in the middle of the gully. If we can get that behind us we shall, at least, have no one at our backs.”

“Come along, then. Come on, Murri. Keep well behind me, Geordie.”

But George Law was not of the sort to seek to protect himself behind any one, and he took no notice of this direction, but quickened his pace a little and rode up alongside of his brother, without a word, to face the danger, whatever it might be, equally with him. Alec knew what he meant by doing so, and gave one of those little nods of the head that meant so very much between the brothers.

The next few moments, when they knew that dozens of pairs of keen and hostile eyes were even then gazing at them from the rocks and crannies and bushes that hid their coming foe, were perhaps the most trying that the boys ever experienced. Every second they expected a shower of spears to dart upon them from their enemies' hiding-places, and yet they had to pass along the hundred yards or so that lay between them and the rock they wished to reach quite slowly and calmly that they might fire upon any native that aimed a spear at them.

They had almost reached the rock where they meant to make their stand, when the first spear, whistling as it flew, thrown with enormous speed from a throwing stick, darted between George and his horse's head. It buried itself deep in the shingle. Geordie turned like a shot, but before he had time to lift his hand the black warrior had dropped behind the rock, where he was completely hidden. This was the signal for attack, and many spears were darted at them from either side as they rode on. One struck Jezebel, one of the led horses, and made her rear and kick out viciously, but as yet the boys and Murri were unhurt. Como had one or two narrow escapes ; in fact he was grazed by one spear.

The boys' blood began to boil, for they could get no shot at all at any of their assailants, and they themselves were quite open to attack. Directly that they reached the rock George sprang from the saddle and sang out in a voice, made clear and loud by excitement—what need was there for whispering now?—

“Get down, Alec ; they are aiming at Como and the horses, the brutes ; we must send 'em round to the other side of the rock with Murri. Keep them safe, or we are done for.”

No sooner said than done. In an instant Alec was by his side, and, making Murri understand what he was to do, they gave him hold of their bridles. He led the horses to the other side of the little fortress, and the boys stood there alone. Alec, with a true soldier's eye, had seen the advantage of this position, which not only screened them from attack in the rear, but offered a good protection at the sides as well.

The *myalls*, who, in that part of Queensland, are a big, bold, and finely-made race of men, seeing that they could not get at the boys unless they left the shelter of the rocks and bushes where they were hidden, now came out into the open and collected themselves for the attack. There must have been twenty or thirty of them, all armed to the teeth with spears and *nullah-nullahs* and *waddies*, and there, on the extreme left of the group, was Prince Tom, grinning like a demon, and still mounted on Dandy. Besides the men there was a little crowd of *gins*, who collected stones for their husbands, picked up their spears when they were thrown, and goaded the warriors on when the fighting began with their shrieks and wild yells.

"There's that thief of a Tom, look!" said George to his brother; "I'd dearly love to have a shot at him, but I might miss at this distance, and that would never do."

"Don't waste a single shot, Geordie; and look here, we mustn't fire together, or they will be in on us and stick us in no time. I'll shoot first, both my rifle and my revolver, and while I am reloading you keep up a steady fire. It's our only chance. Do you understand?"

Alec's heart was thumping in his throat so that he could hardly speak; he knew how much depended on their keeping cool and never losing their heads. Geordie's steady answer relieved him somewhat, and surprised him too, for the boy's face to his very lips was white.

"Aye, aye, Alec, I understand. God protect us now, for they are on us."

The words had hardly left his lips before the

blacks had made a run and discharged a little cloud of spears at them. The boys dropped on their knees, and the weapons striking the rock above them fell harmlessly behind them. Then Alec fired. His hand was as steady as the rock itself now that the supreme moment had come, and he aimed quite quietly. With the two quick reports of his rifle two savages fell dead, and then instantly dropping his rifle he picked up his revolver, and fired six shots again in rapid succession.

Hearing, for the first time, the awful report of the white man's mysterious weapon, and seeing two of their number fall dead from no apparent cause, stayed for a moment the black men's attack; but seeing no evil results ensue from the other shots—for Alec was not accustomed to pistol shooting and got a wrong elevation—they plucked up courage again and renewed the attack. They had fallen back a little when Alec first fired, but hearing that the mysterious noise had ceased they again rushed forward.

The little ravine that a moment before had appeared so quiet and deserted had suddenly been changed to a scene of the wildest fury. The savages were leaping and bounding about, uttering the most unearthly of cries as they brandished their *waddies* and their spears; the women, whose thin bodies seemed here, there, and everywhere at once, added their yells and shrieks to the awful clamour.

Before Alec had had time to reload, a second volley of spears was discharged at them, and George, as coolly as though aiming at pigeons, fired in return. He hit one man, killing him, and wounded another, who fell to the earth shrieking in his agony. By the time he had emptied the six barrels of his revolver

three more men, who had come up to close quarters, had received disabling wounds, and the greater part of the *myalls*, thinking that they had had enough of it, rushed off with the women up the cliffs. But a few bolder spirits still remained to dispute the field.

Four great naked fellows, strong and muscular, and made hideous by the paint with which they had daubed themselves, rushed in upon the lads, *waddies* in hand, and rending the air with their shrieks. The boys gave one quick glance at each other as though to say farewell, and seizing the barrels of their rifles in both hands they waited for the assault. But before the *myalls* reached them unexpected help came to their aid. Just as the foremost of the men was within a few feet of the rock, a figure dashed round from the other side of it like a flash of light and dealt the gigantic savage so fierce and heavy a blow on the side of the head with a stone that he held in his hand that it stretched him silent and senseless on the sand.

It was Murri who had thus rushed to their rescue.

They now were but three to three, as Murri instantly attacked another of the *myalls* with the *waddy* which he had snatched from the hand of his fallen foe. George made a step forward, and quickly swinging his rifle round he brought it heavily down upon the neck of another of the men. But the blow was not a disabling one ; he had aimed it at his head, but the wary savage had bent on one side. Before George had time to recover himself and lift his weapon for a second blow his opponent sprang in, and striking him a sickening blow on the top of the head he felled him to the ground. He would have had his head beaten in by the savage had not Como leaped

over his master's prostrate body and, showing all his strong white teeth, flown at the enemy. This created a momentary diversion.

Alec saw George fall, and felt sure, from the nature of the blow he had seen him receive, that he was dead. He dealt a wild blow at the man with whom he was engaged and disabled him, and then, with such a yell of fury as a lioness gives when she protects her young, he turned upon his brother's foe. He sprang across Geordie's body as it lay face downwards in the sand, and seizing in one powerful hand the descending arm of the savage, who had kicked Como to one side and was aiming a second cruel blow at the boy as he lay, he began a hand-to-hand struggle with him.

Alec dealt him a crashing blow between the eyes with his disengaged fist as he leaped upon him, and then clasping him in both his arms he tried to bring him to the ground. The *myall* was a grand specimen of the tall Queensland savage, strong and fully developed, and at an ordinary time Alec would have been as a child in his hands, but the sight of this murderous black slaying his brother Geordie, his only brother, had stirred up such a mad tempest of passion in Alec's breast that he was, for the time, as strong as any three. Every muscle in his strong young body was strained, every sinew and fibre stiffened for the effort, and as he felt the wild mad struggles of the savage to free himself from his grip his grasp seemed to grow stronger, and his clutch upon his hot and swelling throat to grow fiercer every second. Gradually, as the seconds passed, the struggles of the black grew less and less, but Alec never loosed his hold, so maddened was he with rage and despair, till, with

starting eyes, the head of the savage rolled over on his shoulder, and when at last Alec's convulsive grip was relaxed, and he turned with a sob of anguish to where his brother lay, the black man fell down—dead.

In the meantime Murri was not idle; he was engaged, upon pretty equal terms, with the one remaining savage. They had neither done any damage to the other, when suddenly the stalwart black, seeing the fate of his companion at Alec's hands, sprang away from Murri, and made secure his position by an ignominious flight. Murri started in pursuit, but he soon saw the hopelessness or folly of it, and stopped. As he did so he saw Prince Tom some little way down the gully, still mounted on Dandy, who, wild with fear at the firing and at the proximity of the shrieking savages, was rushing about the little glen, refusing to mount the steep sides, as Tom was trying to force him to do.

Seeing the state of fear the horse was in, Murri called him loudly by his name several times, thinking that he might try to rejoin them. At the first sound of his name the intelligent creature pricked up his ears and, rearing suddenly, turned in the direction of his friends. As he did so, Prince Tom, dislodged by the sudden bound of the horse, lost his seat and fell heavily to the ground. He could not succeed in disentangling himself, as the horse tore along at full speed; one foot was held fast in the stirrup, and as the maddened horse rushed wildly over the rocky ground to rejoin the others the unfortunate man's head and body were beaten almost to pieces on the jagged stones. When Dandy at last stopped, all trembling and foaming, by Murri's side, Prince

Tom was nothing but a bruised and battered corpse.

When Alec's anger and revenge were satisfied, and he felt that the murderer of his brother was dead beneath his hands, he passionately threw himself down by the side of his brother, and, with the unaccustomed tears pouring down his cheeks, he raised his poor pale face from the sand. He could have lifted up his voice and howled like any savage, for he loved this bright young brother of his more than all else in the world beside.

Geordie's face was white as marble, and his eyes were closed as though in sleep, his bright dark waves of hair were covered with the sand in which he had fallen, and a great wide wound, from which the blood had flowed that stained one side of his head and neck, extended across the crown.

Alec, stooping over Geordie, whom he had partly raised and laid against his heaving chest, was calling him by all the old familiar names of their childhood, and was speaking to him as though he thought the boy would hear his voice. He was quite oblivious to all that was going on around him. He had fought a good fight, and it had gone against him, inasmuch as he had lost the brother whom he loved beyond himself. What did anything else matter to him then : the old home station ; their wild dream of gold ; the struggle he had just gone through ? All seemed dream-like and unreal, and the only fact that was patent to his mind was that Geordie, his dear brother, his better self, was lying dead in his arms. The noon-day heat of the tropical sun poured on him unobserved, his own wounds and bruises were unfelt, and his whole soul seemed to sob itself out in the one great cry he uttered—

"Oh, that it had been me instead!"

There might have been something in his agonised accents that made itself heard in Geordie's closed and senseless ears, and that called back the life that was fluttering within him to depart, for at Alec's cry a feeble tiny sigh just parted the dying boy's pale lips, and his eyelids quivered as though they would uncloze.

Alec gave one wild shriek of rapture.

"*Thank Heaven*, he is not dead! Murri, Murri," he cried, in his new-born joy, "bring water. *Burrina, burrima*" (quickly, quickly).

Murri, who had been so intent on his own part of the fight as not to notice what had happened to the boys, turned round and loosed Dandy's bridle as he heard Alec's cry. He now saw that "Missa Law," his friend and favourite, was dead or badly wounded, and rushed to his side to help. He saw at once what was necessary, and ran to the other side of the rock, where he had tied the bridles of the five horses to the stem of a sturdy little tree that grew in a cleft of the rock.

The water, from one of the battered tins in which they carried it, was quite tepid from the heat of the sun, but it served to revive George a little, and the deathly pallor passed from his face. In a few moments, as the effects of the stunning blow he had received began to pass away, he opened his eyes and looked about him in a dazed, astonished way. At last he looked up and saw Alec's face anxiously bending over him, then he seemed to remember where he was.

"What is the matter?" he said, faintly. "Are we all here, and have they gone away? Tell me, are you hurt, Arrick?"

It was an old pet name of his for his brother,

formed when he was a little lad and could not yet speak plainly. In his terrible weakness he seemed to drop, unconsciously, into the old familiar habit.

Alec's voice was husky when he answered, though he did his best to speak quite calmly.

"No, I'm all right, Geordie, lad ; but you are hurt and musn't talk."

"My head, is it?" he said, vaguely ; and then, as Alec and Murri lifted him from the ground to carry him to the shade of a clump of trees that stood a little to one side at the entrance to the glen, his eyes closed with faintness, and he seemed to slip off again to insensibility.

CHAPTER VII.

LIFE OR DEATH?

ALL that long sultry day Alec fluctuated between hope and despair. At one moment he thought George better, and the next that he was worse.

Murri, who in his wild, untaught way was as tender and gentle as possible, found some leaves of a herb which he said would heal the wound. He moistened them with water and pounded them between two stones and applied them to George's head. They seemed cool and refreshing. Alec and Murri had formed a rough sort of couch of tall grasses and leaves, over which they spread one of their blue blankets, and on this they had laid George down. Over him Alec, who was as natty and deft-handed as a sailor, rigged up another blanket as a sort of awning to protect him from the sun. Sitting by the side of him all that anxious day, with a heart full of fears for his brother and eyes that were constantly on the alert for the return of the enemy, Alec swept away, with a green branch, the noxious black flies that constantly tried to settle on George's semi-conscious body.

Murri assured him that, after such a terrible loss as they had sustained that morning, the *myalls* would not think of returning to the attack, but Alec could not rest certain of it. He heard at a distance their wild lament over their dead, the shrieks of the *gins*, and the weird moans and cries of the men, but it

seemed to him that they were gradually growing fainter and further away.

Murri, like the faithful henchman that he was, undertook all the management of affairs, whilst Alec devoted his time to his brother. He it was who hobbled and unloaded all the horses, and saw that they did not wander far afield, though they were not anxious to go far, even in search of food, in the great heat of the afternoon. He it was who found water, and filled the "billies," and led the horses to drink. He it was who killed the little bandicoot, of which Alec made a sort of barbarous but nutritious soup for George; he it was in short who did everything that day, and proved himself to be a true help to them. All day long Como, who knew that something was amiss, kept wandering aimlessly about, occasionally going as far as the native well that Murri had found, to drink a little, but always coming back to lick the inert hand of his master, which lay weakly and limply by the side of him.

Towards evening, when at sunset a breeze sprang up, and the air grew cooler, George revived a great deal. He was able to eat some of the food that Alec had prepared for him, and soon managed to sit up a little, with Alec as a support to his back, and talk.

"I feel quite well now, Alec, and I mean to talk, so don't try to stop me. Tell me, first of all, if you were hurt in the fight."

"Nothing to speak of; I got one or two nasty thumps from a *waddy*, and one rather awkward chop on the shoulder from my man's *nullah-nullah*, but beyond feeling a little stiff I'm all right, I think."

"Think! Do you mean to say you haven't looked at your shoulder yet?"

“Not yet, I haven’t had time ; I’ve been too busy with you. Now don’t you excite yourself, or you will be ill again.”

“Excite myself ! I should think I will. If you don’t instantly take your shirt off and let me see if you are badly hurt, I’ll get up, and jump about and shout. What a selfish beast I have been to lie here comfortably insensible whilst you were in such pain. Now then, off with that shirt.”

Alec did as he was bidden, for although George’s voice was weak, there was the old resolute tone about it, and Alec knew that he would do what he threatened. He was glad, now that he came to think of himself, to get the shirt off, for his shoulder felt very stiff and sore. Murri had to help him, for he could not lift his left arm above his head. The *myall’s nullah-nullah* had made a terrible bruise, which had already turned black and blue, and in one place, where the flesh had been cut, the shirt adhered to the wound. But it was nothing of any great importance, and the hardy fellow scarcely felt anything of it beyond the stiffness, and a certain amount of pain. Cold water and a little bandage soon put it all right.

The next day George said that he felt well, and was quite fit to go on, but Alec utterly refused to do so. He said that a day’s rest would do none of them any harm, and that he thought they might stay there with comparative safety, as the natives, after securing their dead, seemed to have gone away. There was plenty of feed for the horses too, which they might not get again in such abundance on the dry and parched-up plains between that place and the mountains. George consented to his brother’s plan, though he chafed a little at the delay, for he felt really well

enough to go on. It was wonderful to see the difference that a night's rest and coolness had made in him. Except that he was a trifle pale, and that his head was bound up, he looked the same strong cheery fellow as ever. He had a most wonderful vitality, and his health being perfect and his constitution sound and strong, he was able to throw off an illness that would have prostrated another man.

He was up before daylight, and, regardless of Alec's injunctions to "sit still" and "be quiet," he would insist on doing his share of the work.

"Fiddlesticks, Alec," was his polite remark to his brother when he asked him not to get up. "I'm all right and jolly as possible, and if you think I'm going to let you and Murri do all the work you are mistaken."

"You want your breakfast," said Alec, with a laugh. "You are hungry, and think us slow. Don't do the virtuous and pretend it is anything else—I know better. Well, here you are then, youngster; take this wood and make the fire up. I'll go and fill the 'billy.'"

After their breakfast, at which George certainly did not behave much like an invalid, they saw that all the horses were close to, and then they walked off with Murri to the entrance of the glen, near to which they were encamped. Across an enormous plain of sand and spinifex and tangled *mulga* scrub, that was marked here and there with long dark lines of bush where the creeks and watercourses ran, lay the great blue mountains, towering high into the lambent sky, amongst which was hidden the golden treasure that they sought. It was a glorious sight, for not a cloud obscured the sky, and in that marvellous atmosphere

every ridge and azure peak stood out as clearly and sharply defined as though no sixty miles of air lay between the mountain range and the place where the boys stood.

Whilst the lads were looking at this noble view, which lay spread before them like a grand panorama, Murri, who did not care to waste his time in any such unpractical proceedings, was carefully examining the great trees, under whose shade they stood, to see if he could find traces of opossum in them. Signs that any one but a native would completely ignore were all that he had to guide him, and his quickness of vision in detecting these traces was wonderful. Murri would saunter to a tree that he thought looked promising, and if an opossum had climbed it he would instantly detect the little scratches the animal had made in ascending. He quickly found a massive tree which bore on its bark the toe-holes of an opossum ; he then sought for one of these that had a little earth still sticking to it. When he had found it he softly blew on the earth to see if it held together. It did not ; it was dry, and crumbled away at once, telling him by its so doing that the marks were not very recent ones. If the opossum had climbed the tree that morning the earth would have been damp, and would have held together when he blew on it.

“Bail potchum” (no ’possum) “on um tree. Must go catch kangaroo, you *mil-mil*” (see) ; “clever fellow, Murri.”

The native was away for about two hours, and when he returned he brought the body of a good large kangaroo with him, which he had stalked and killed.

This addition to their stores was very useful, and

indeed, necessary, for although they had managed to get Dandy back again, all the provisions that Prince Tom had stolen from them and packed on him had utterly and hopelessly vanished. Murri himself cooked the animal, as is the right and prerogative always of the man who slays the game, and ate an enormous quantity of it also; but eat as he could there was enough for all of them that night, and for their first meal next day. They kept a keen watch that night again, but they neither heard nor saw anything of the *myalls*.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE ENEMY

THE boys were up next morning, whilst still the stars shone undimmed in the sky, and succeeded in catching their horses without very much trouble. The fire had smouldered all night through, so that they had a cheerful blaze very quickly, and boiled their tea in a few minutes. They were anxious to make as early a start as possible, as they had lost time the day before, and as soon as they could tear Murri away from the still plenteous remains of their yesterday's roast they sprang into the saddle. But the native was wiser than they, for, when they were mounted, and Como was leaping round them and barking in a manner that was highly indecorous in a dog of his years and sober aspect, he stopped them, and said in his funny English—

“White fellow bail *pitnee*” (never thinks). “Mine must fill um bockles plenty much water. Bail water bong along o’ this stage. Hot, hot this day. All um creek gone away.”

Saying this he filled all the canvas water bottles at the spring, and then took a long drink himself, as though laying in a good store of the precious commodity.

Murri was right; the day was an intensely hot one, and every moment of all that long forenoon the scorching sun gained greater power. The country through which they were riding was quite shadeless

for the great rolling plains were only covered with a dense tall growth of perfectly dry and withered grass and scrub. The twigs of the *mulga* and the stunted iron-bark bushes were so dry and brittle that they rattled like bones when shaken by the horses as they passed through them, and broke off short if they were touched. The earth was either dried to a powder or baked so firm and hard that the horses' hoofs rang on it as though on a pavement. The very trees that grew on the banks of the gullies were shrivelled and brown. The one or two creeks that they had to cross—taking the horses up and down the steep crumbling banks with the greatest difficulty—were mere tracks of white and dazzling sand, with here and there, in the shadow of the bank, a tiny pool, that was fast drying up, remaining to prove that it ever had been a rapid watercourse. This sand, as, indeed, did the whole earth, reflected the burning rays of the sun till to move out of the shade was almost intolerable.

It was evident, from the parched and dried-up appearance of all vegetation, and from the lowness of the water in the little pools of the creek, that there had been no rain for very many months. There had been no heavy rainfall at Wandaroo for a very long period, and it seemed that this part of the country had suffered a much longer drought. Flocks of birds were flying about the little stagnant pools in the creeks, dashing themselves head first into the water in their eagerness to quench their thirst. Crowds of animals, kangaroos and wallabies principally, were congregated at the muddy margins to drink at the fast-failing supply. No rain had fallen thereabouts for a year or more.

To make matters worse, infinitely worse, a stifling

hot wind rose with the sun, blowing from the west, all across the gigantic sand plains of the interior where the air was dried and heated as though in some vast furnace. Every breath that they drew was painful, and the heated blasts of air dried up the moisture of their body and shrivelled their skin in a manner that must be experienced to be believed. The animals, as is always the case, seemed to feel the heat even more than the men ; to such an extent did the horses suffer that it seemed barbarous to ride them, and had Murri not continually urged the lads to try to get to Nooergup, where he said was an unfailing spring, they would have halted for the sake of their cattle. They did make one good halt at mid-day to rest the horses, which were far too jaded to eat, although they had been so spirited in the early morning before the hot wind had sprung up.

It was towards the middle of the afternoon, some little time after they had renewed their march, that the sky began to grow lurid at the horizon and the day to grow faintly dimmer. The sun still poured down its scorching rays upon them ; the wind seemed to grow hotter and hotter till men and animals fairly gasped for breath, and the air, tremulous with the heat of the burning earth, was quivering to a height of twenty feet above their heads. Every moment the sky grew duller, and in the west a copper-coloured cloud rose slowly in the sky ; gradually the light of day grew red, and thin films of cloud rapidly sweeping across the face of the sun changed his brightness to a dull blood hue.

All the members of the little party well knew what this meant. Some tribe of *myalls* had carelessly left their camp fire not quite extinguished, and the hot

wind that was blowing had re-animated the dying embers in the early morning and set fire to the bush. Every blade of grass, every bit of scrub, and every leaf, were as dry as tinder, and leaped into flame the instant that the rapidly-spreading fire came to it. In a short time the whole district was blazing, and fanned by the strong hot wind, the fire spread in all directions with inconceivable rapidity.

Directly that Murri, who was the first to detect the ruddy tint in the western sky, had called Alec's attention to the fact of the bush fire, they came to a halt to consult as to what had better be done.

"With this strong wind the fire will travel much quicker than we can," said Alec, with a tone of anxiety in his voice that was very natural in their present danger; "or we could turn and ride back to our last camp, for there is water there, and no fire could reach us on that open sandy space."

"The horses couldn't travel that far under eight hours; they are almost done up as it is," said George. "Heavens, how hot it is! It is like breathing in an oven."

"No, I don't think they could; it has been a trying day for them, and they are pretty well pumped. We *are* unlucky beggars; everything seems against us; you nearly killed by the *myalls*, Prince Tom robbing us of our stores, and now all of us to be burnt up alive. There isn't a creek or a pool that we can get into, and the fire is quickly marching up to us. There! Didn't you smell the burning fern just then?"

"Yes; by Jove! it is coming near; but don't be so despondent, Alec. It isn't on us yet. Don't you think that by pushing on to the north or south, as fast

as ever we can make the horses go, we might reach the end of the line of fire and head round it? Let us ask Murri."

But the native, who had been scanning, with the keenest anxiety in every line of his face, the advancing line of smoke, said that the fire was already too extended for them to think of doing that, and that in his opinion the only plan that offered them any chance of safety was to push ahead with the greatest speed and try to reach the rocks at Nooergup before the flames could meet them. He spoke with most unusual excitement, his quick, restless eyes expressing better than his words his sense of their imminent danger.

"*Burrina, burrima*" (quickly, quickly), said he with rapid utterance. "Nebbe mind um *yarroman*. Ride, ride, ride. Kill um *yarroman*, then you not dead. Plenty much slow go, all fellow dead along o' this place."

Seeing from his manner that he thought their peril great, and knowing full well the horrors of a great bush fire, the boys put their horses to their best speed and galloped on. It almost seemed like courting death to ride straight in the teeth of the advancing fire, but they knew that they might rely upon Murri's word, so they acted as he advised. The horses themselves soon became aware of their danger, for when they had crossed the next low ridge, after an hour's rapid riding along a fairly level stretch of scrub-covered country, the line of leaping flame could be seen, stretching as far as the eye could see to the north and south. The quivering limbs of the beasts, their dilated nostrils and wildly starting eyes, showed how greatly they feared the dreaded element.

Now it was that they began to pass numbers of

animals all hurrying and rushing along in abject terror in the opposite direction to the horsemen. Kangaroos and wallabies progressing by great leaps ; emus flapping their inefficient wings to help them in their flight ; bush rats and smaller creatures scuttling along by the side of wriggling snakes and currish dingoes. Overhead were flocks of parrots, pigeons, cockatoos, and other bush birds, all flying away from the great cloud of rolling smoke and flame that seemed to stride with enormous steps after the flying creatures. For the time all enmities between them seemed forgotten ; kangaroos and dingoes, snakes and rats and opossums, rushed along side by side in the friendliness of a great common danger.

Every moment as the three hurried on the heat became greater ; the speed of the horses now grew less just when there was the greatest need for their swiftness. They could only be kept at the gallop by incessant application of the spur, and the boys hated to punish in this way the faithful creatures that had borne them so nobly, but they knew that the horses' lives as well as their own depended upon their being able to keep up their present pace for a mile or two more.

They could now plainly hear the wild roar and crackling of the awful fire as it consumed everything before it in its devastating march, and the burning air that came in puffs and beat upon them, scorched and withered them. Their very eyeballs seemed to dry within their sockets, and the smarting lids, when they closed them, hardly kept out the awful glare. The natural light of day was gone, for the whole sky was covered with one vast cloud of lurid smoke, and everything looked red and burning from the ruddy light of the sweeping flame.

Still Nooergup, their haven of refuge, lay a mile ahead of them. Murri pointed it out to them, and seemingly close behind it rose the moving wall of flame. Could they but reach those barren rocks before the line of fire encircled it and sped again on its way they were safe ; but with failing worn-out horses, and exhausted as the riders were with the heat and want of air, it seemed impossible.

The lips of all three were cracked and bleeding from the heat of this awful *sirocco*, and their tongues were dry and rattling in their parched mouths. They had drunk and lost by the rapid evaporation from their canvas water bottles every drop of water that they had brought from their last camp, and their unmoistened lips could hardly articulate. When they did speak their voices were so harsh and hoarse and changed as scarcely to be intelligible. Their speed was greatly lessened from each of them having to lead one of the spare horses, for, although these three horses were much less exhausted than those which were ridden, they were in a much greater state of alarm, and much more restive.

Alec's noble and high-spirited horse, Amber, was much less jaded than the horses that George and Murri rode, though it was more terrified and alarmed than any of the others at the roaring and flaring of the now nearing fire. Seeing that his own horse was rapidly failing, and that Amber still had reserve stores of strength, George goaded on his overstrained steed and caught up Alec, who was some few paces ahead. His face, although scorched by the heat, looked very wan and drawn, and no one could have recognised his clear, sweet voice in the sobbing, croaking tones in which he spoke. At first he could

hardly utter a sound, but he forced his voice, and made himself heard above the roaring of the advancing flames.

"Arrick, old boy, push on. There is something in Amber yet, though Firebrace is about done up. You can get through and on to the rocks. Make Como come with you."

"Geordie!" cried Alec, in a tone of reproach, and looking round at him with his stiff and bloodshot eyes. "Leave you? We *both* get through or we *die together* on this side."

He said no more, but checked his horse, and brought him down to Firebrace's pace, and Geordie knew that further remonstrance was in vain. Would he not have acted just the same himself had he been the better mounted?

They were now within a hundred yards of Nooergup, which was just a little mass of barren tumbled rocks, on a slight elevation, rising, like an island, from the sea of stunted trees, scrub, and tall grasses, that surrounded it on all sides. The rushing line of fire had already reached it, and the huge flames, ten feet in height in their lowest part, were already licking the rocks at the sides with flickering blazing tongues, as though they would consume even the rocks that impeded their progress. But the fire had not passed all along it yet, and just where the rocks stood there was a break in the livid, roaring line.

Towards this the riders were madly goading on their panting horses. One minute longer, and it will be too late! The very air seems fire; they can only get their breath with the utmost difficulty. Murri has wrapped his poor naked body in the blue blanket that was fastened to his saddle, to protect

himself from the flying sparks and the deadly heat. There is a roaring in their ears as of a mighty sea, and a flame and glare before their eyes as though heaven and earth are fire. It almost seems that the flames are bending forward, and hurrying and rushing to envelop them.

There is still a narrow opening in the vivid line of fire. Only a few seconds more, and they will be safe. Fifty yards! forty yards!! thirty yards to go!!! And then——! George's horse staggers, and with a sob like a human being in distress its legs almost give way.

"Heaven help us now!" cried Alec, in despair.

But even then he does not give up. He looses the horse he has been leading, and leaning across, half out of his saddle, he gives poor trembling Firebrace a blow across the quarters with his whip. George, weakened by his wound, is almost insensible, but he sticks in his saddle; and his horse, making one last awful effort, bears him between the narrow gates of flame, and, placing his master in safety, falls dead of a broken heart.

The shock of the fall revives George, and, disentangling himself from the stirrups, he springs to his feet.

He is alone!

The line of fire has passed on, the narrow opening is closed, and he is behind the wall of flame, which is rushing on to consume in its fiery embrace the brother who had saved him a moment before.

When Alec stooped to strike Firebrace, to urge him on to one final effort, Amber, terrified beyond all control at the nearness of the flames, swerved to one side, and by the time Alec had again turned his head



"HE SEIZED THE NATIVE ROUND HIS SLIM, NAKED BODY." (p. 79.)

towards the rocks the disconnected line of fire had rejoined itself, and presented an unbroken front to him. At this moment, when every hope seemed extinguished, his mad courage came to his aid, and suggested one last chance. A chance in a thousand, but still a chance.

He saw that Murri had been as unsuccessful as himself, and that he was still in front of the leaping line of fire ; he shouted to him to dismount, and, for all his huskiness, his voice rang out like a clarion, and the man heard him, and blindly obeyed, like a child, in his fear and confusion, doing exactly as he was bidden.

“And now stand still,” roared Alec.

Backing his horse for some little distance to gain the necessary speed, Alec, goading Amber with voice and spur alike, rushed like lightning towards the soaring flames. Straining every muscle, he seized the native round his slim, naked body, and by an almost superhuman effort he lifted him from the ground. At the same moment he again dashed his spurs into Amber’s throbbing sides, and, giving the noble creature his head, he boldly rode at the wall of fire.

Like a greyhound the superb horse cleared the glowing heart of the fire, and darting with inconceivable speed through the flickering flame, which for one second surged and beat about him, he landed with his double burden in safety on the glowing ashes of the ground the fire had just passed over. A few strides more, and they were side by side with George.

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER THE FIRE.

AT first they were all too exhausted to speak. Alec loosed his grip of Murri, and slipping from his horse, which was trembling in every limb from the terrible strain it had gone through, staggered to where his brother was standing. Geordie was half dazed with the agony he had undergone, for when he found himself alone and shut off from the others by the white, hot wave of fire that surged between them, he gave up all hopes, even the faintest, of ever seeing his brother again. He had stood quite still for a moment or two by the side of his dead horse, gazing vacantly at the fire as it swept majestically forward, and the revulsion of feeling was almost too great for him to bear when he saw the leaping horse and its burden flying through the sheet of flame. For an instant horse and rider, looming gigantic through the haze of smoke, seemed to hang above him, and then the noble charger struck the smouldering earth, and he knew that both horse and rider were saved.

Both Alec and Murri were almost unrecognisable, so blackened and charred were they with the fiery ordeal they had undergone: their hair was singed, and Murri was painfully scorched in one or two places. The native was the first to recover his composure; his nature was much less sensitive and highly-strung than that of the English lads. He had been terribly frightened, but that was over now, and, feeling the

pangs of thirst very keenly, the new sensation quickly removed remembrance of the old. It was no use being overcome with an emotion that was past, and it was of great use to supply a want that was actual and very present ; so in this very practical state of mind he walked off with a tin from Amber's saddle to the place where he knew was the unfailing little spring he had spoken of in the morning.

The water was low in the little rock basin, but it promised them, at any rate, a sufficiency. Murri hastily drank a tinful, and then carried some to where Alec and George were sitting, exhausted and panting for breath. Never had either of them drank with such rapture ; the physical bliss of that draught of pure cool water was the keenest they had ever felt. It put new life into them, and, although the air was still like the breath of a furnace, they sprang to their feet refreshed. Alec's first thought, after he found that Geordie was unhurt, was for Amber ; he led him to the little pool, and before he quenched his own thirst, which as yet was not half satisfied, he gave drink to the noble animal that had saved him.

Murri, who had quite regained his usual practical calm in the few moments since they had been safely landed on the rocks, was standing by them as Alec watered his horse. His head was moving from side to side, and his quick eye glanced rapidly over everything.

"Plenty hunglee by-'m-by. Mine go catch um wallaby ; him can't run 'way 'cause along o' fire," he said, and, pointing to a scorched-up looking creature at some little distance from them, he started in pursuit, armed with the waddy from his sinew belt.

"What a fellow he is—he thinks of nothing but

eating," said George, with a half laugh, for now that the awful tension of his nerves was relaxed he could not help seeing the comic side of things, notwithstanding their precarious position. "The instant that he escapes death by burning he thinks he can make the very fire that nearly killed him useful in catching his prey."

"Well, it is a good thing for us that he is so business-like, for everything we brought with us is on the other side of the fire."

"Oh, and Como, too, and the horses!" said George, with a shudder. "In my relief at having you safe I had forgotten everything else; and look, Alec, poor Firebrace dropped dead the minute he had crossed the line of fire."

"It has been a narrow escape for all. I never expected that any of us could be saved. When I saw the fire had cut me off from the rocks I thought I was done for, and then I determined to make a rush for it, and with the blood beating in my ears like the ringing of a bell I turned Amber towards the fire."

"Look!" suddenly and excitedly called out George, who was leaning against the horse, which did not move a yard from them; "I believe the flames are sinking just over yonder. We might get through and try to save Como and the horses."

Alec, following the direction of his eager, outstretched hand, saw that in one part of the line, where there was a sandy little patch nearly bare of vegetation, the flames had almost become extinguished.

"Yes, yes," he cried; "come along. Quickly, quickly; we may save them yet."

The two lads, made strong by the thought that they might save the lives of the poor creatures, rushed

across the hot and still smoking earth towards the little barren place. There was hardly any fire there, and, darting across it, they stood once more in front of the blazing line. Three of the horses—for Dandy had disappeared, never to be seen again—maddened with terror, yet trembling with fatigue and exhaustion, were rushing backwards and forwards in front of the advancing flames, as though fascinated and enthralled by the very thing they dreaded. The two boys, shouting at the same time, that they might be heard above the roar of the fire, called aloud to them; and the poor distraught creatures, hearing the voices of their lords and masters, who were as gods to them, turned at once, and, throwing their heads in the air, came rushing to them with loud neighs, just as one sees a dog which has been lost in the streets come tearing to his master when he sees him again in the crowd. They followed the boys closely, glad to touch them with their hot, soft muzzles to make sure that they had found them, with a mute appeal for water in their sunken eyes that was inexpressibly touching.

George let Alec lead them to the rocks and to the spring, and turned back once more to look for Como, which he had not seen with the horses. He could see nothing of his dear old friend at first, but after a short time he thought he could distinguish some strange object lying quite still and motionless just in front of the quickly-marching blaze at some little distance from him. Towards this he quickly ran, and found that it was Como lying singed and senseless, only a yard or two from the flames. Drawing a deep breath, and holding his hat before his face, he darted in and, scorched and blinded by the heat, dragged the heavy body out of

reach of the fire. He thought that there was still a look of life about it, so passing both arms round the great chest of the animal, which hung limply in his grasp, he started off at a run towards the almost surrounded sand patch with the weighty burden in his arms.

Well for him that he was fleet of foot as well as strong of limb, for he only just reached the little barren spot before the broad arms of the fire met again in a silent embrace that would have cut him off for ever. The great flames soared up higher and stronger with a sweeping flare, as they came together again, but boy and dog had passed between them.

"Geordie, Geordie!" said Alec, "what a frightful risk to run; you had no right to do it."

"But I couldn't leave Como to burn."

"I fear he is dead after all."

But he was not; there was life in the old dog yet, and after they had poured water over him and down his throat he showed signs of life, and feebly licked the face of his master, who was stooping over him.

"Well," said Geordie at supper time, when coolness had come with the night, and they were eating the wallaby that Murri had succeeded in killing. "Well, we ought to be a united party after this. Everybody seems to have been saving and helping everybody else."

"It has been a day of terrible dangers," answered Alec, "but—let me whisper it, Geordie—I have *enjoyed* it. It is an awful thing to say, perhaps, but anything so grand as that one leap into the great sheet of flame I never felt. It was worth years of ordinary living."

That night it was long before the lads could get

to rest ; they had been excited too intensely by the adventurous day they had passed through for sleep to visit them quickly. Murri, who seemed to have no more nerve than a jelly-fish, after a few philosophical remarks upon the advisability of going to sleep at once, had wrapped himself in his blanket and fallen asleep at the same moment. The night had grown cooler, for the hot wind ceased to blow at about sunset, and the heavy pall of smoke having rolled away, the quiet stars shone down upon them from a sky that was clear and deep once more. The fire, which seemed to have received a check at one of the great deep gullies they had crossed in the morning, looked as though it were dying down, although now and again the eastern sky throbbed with a ruddy glow as some little patch of scrub or bush caught fire and flared up brightly in the blue still night.

How solemn was the great silence of that wide expanse which, for a time, was deprived of all life ! Every breathing thing had fled before the fire, and a silence as of death reigned over all the land. The lads, for all their bold spirit and boyish lack of sentiment, felt the impressiveness of it at last, and, ceasing their chattering, sank into a stillness which soon flowed into sleep.

Night crept on ; the moon sank behind the grave white peaks of the mountains that from their heights watched for the dawn of the day ; the steady-pacing hours swept over the burnt black earth ; and then in the fulness of its time the east glowed again, but with a rose that was not the rose of ruin and fire but the warmth and glory of a new day's birth.

All three of them slept soundly through the

night, and their slumbers might have encroached on the morning had not a heavy shower of rain fallen just before sunrise and awakened them. It almost seemed that the fire which had devastated the land had brought the remedial rain in its train, for, whereas there had previously been a drought of a year or more in all that district, rain now fell in heavy refreshing showers directly after the conflagration occurred.

The fact of this rain falling then was of the greatest importance to the little band of adventurers, for not only was there an immediate alteration for the better in the temperature, but these heavy showers would replenish the springs and refill the dried-up creeks, and make the young grass grow that was so imperative a necessity for their horses.

There were some few bushes and little clumps of withered grass left unconsumed among the rocks of Nooergup, and, as these offered a scanty keep for the horses for one day, the boys agreed that they would not leave their present camp till the next morning. The reason for this decision was the worn-out condition of the horses, all of which stood sadly in need of a day's rest, and the fact that until the burnt grass sprouted again they would be unable to get feed for them. They knew that after these showers, which fell both in the morning and the evening of the day after the fire, the young grass would grow incredibly quickly, and that the feeding of their horses would no longer be a cause of anxiety to them.

"Don't you wish that those pretty little black moustaches of yours, Alec, would grow again after their singeing as quickly as the grass?" said George,

mockingly, to his brother, and looking at him with a laughing face.

"Don't you wish you had some to be singed, young Impudence?" said Alec, throwing a little piece of damper at him which the resuscitated Como instantly caught and swallowed, thinking it was meant for him.

Murri, by whose valuable opinion they were always greatly guided, thought the little rest was advisable, so they did not leave Nooergup until the second day after the fire.

It was a damp and misty morning when they started. George had taken his saddle from poor Firebrace and transferred it to Vaulty, a strong serviceable roan, which he rode henceforth. The sun soon dispelled the light silvery cloud which hung above the steaming earth. When this soft veil had been withdrawn they could see, across the charred and blackened plain, the blue mountains of their hopes rising high into the dazzling sky, apparently close to them. But in reality, as Murri assured them, they lay three days' journey away.

All that day they journeyed across the burnt monotonous plain, but towards evening they reached the further edge of it, where the fire had originated, and once more were in a region of thick scrub and dense bush, which already looked fresher and almost green again after the copious rains, so quickly does Nature restore herself. Here again, after a day of silence and stillness on the wasted plains, they heard the voices of birds and saw living creatures moving. Two large emus that they came upon, near a little park-like patch of tall *casuarina* trees, almost led them to a small, recently-filled pool of water, for the birds,

only fearing their enemy man, and thinking that these strange unknown creatures that were approaching them were quadrupeds only, had no fear of them, and walked to their pool without any sign of alarm. The boys stopped Murri from throwing his *boomerang* at them, for they could not find it in their hearts to reward such confidence as the emus showed in them by letting them be killed. Quite inexplicable behaviour Murri thought it. But then he wanted his supper, and was totally without sentiment. Happy savage!

CHAPTER X.

AMONG THE MOUNTAINS.

FOR two days longer they travelled on before they got amongst the low bush-covered hills that formed the spurs of the great mountain range. The time had not appeared long or dull to them, for they had been too fully occupied in surmounting the difficulties of the journey for the hours to hang heavily on their hands. Sometimes a series of intricate and winding creeks and gullies would intercept their path, and in leading their horses up and down the steep sides, and in making a crossing for them over otherwise impassable places, hours would be spent. At other times a long line of *mulga* scrub would stop them, through which, with the greatest damage to their skin and clothes, they had to force a way. In passing these difficult pieces of scrub they always made Murri come last in the line, that he might have the benefit of the opening made by the other riders, and so save his naked body from many scratches and painful little wounds.

It certainly was not easy travelling, but they all were accustomed to the bush, and none of them were afraid of a little hard work, though they may have *liked* it no better than other people. One or other of the lads would perhaps indulge in a boyish growl at the heat, or the thorns, or the weight of the rocks they had sometimes to move aside for their horses to pass along these narrow gullies, but the other

would cheer him on by reminding him of the object for which he was working, and the grumble would end in a laugh.

They rested one night at the edge of the great dim forest that clothed the lower hills, and next morning began the labour of climbing among these giant mountains. The work would be continuous until they reached the Whanga valley, which Murri said was in the very heart of the range, over the first great spur that lay, a gigantic barrier, before them.

In the early light of the coming day, when the shades of night still seemed struggling with the dream of dawn that crept so palely along the valleys and among the rocks, the mountains looked doubly grand and majestic. So black, so unconquerable and vast they loomed against the scarcely lighter sky, that to Geordie's impressionable nature they almost seemed an effectual bar to their progress. Although it was still too dark to see to catch their horses, the boys and Murri were astir, for they had a long climb and a hard day's work before them.

"If I did not well know, Alec, that you and I will let *nothing* stop us, I should almost have said that those dim awful mountains might have been too much for us."

The boy spoke in a hushed, low voice, for in that great stillness before daybreak, when as yet all birds and living things are mute, and when the very air, before the breath of morning stirs it, appears to sleep, it seems a sacrilege to break the solemn silence that, like a mantle, lies about the earth.

"Nothing that man can conquer shall stop us, mountain or river," said Alec, resolutely; who sometimes, as now, failed to read his brother's finer meaning.

"Oh, no, I know that. I don't think you quite understand. Of course we shall get over. I'd dig the mountains down with my own hands before I let them beat me. It isn't that ; it was only a feeling. And now it is gone," said he, suddenly, as a warm flush of rosy light flooded the eastern sky, and was reflected on the white crags of the higher summits. A flute-voiced organ magpie burst into glorious song the moment that the daylight came, and its cheerful music banished the last trace of mystery and awe from George's mind.

A few minutes before they started, just at sunrise, Murri said that they had better take some food with them besides their own dried provisions, as they might be unable to catch anything on the higher parts of the mountains they would have to cross.

"Bail kangaroo, bail wallaby, up along o' there," said Murri, pointing to the mountains. "Mine go catch um bird, bail chewt um, Missa Law ; *boomcrang* plenty much kill."

Leaving their horses hobbled for a moment or two, the boys followed Murri to the edge of the little pool to which the emus had led them the night before.

The little pond, which the rain had filled with clear brown water, was in the centre of an open space, which, after heavy rains, would be a good-sized pool. It was, except for the little sunken place in the middle, quite dry. Round the edges of this brown space of dry mud trees grew thickly. Murri was only armed with his curiously curved black wood *boomcrang*. All three of them hid themselves among the bushes and waited patiently a few minutes for a flock of birds to visit the pool for their morning drink and bath.

They had not to wait very long, for presently a great flock of loudly chattering and squealing white cockatoos came flying in a fluttering crowd to the pool.

Many perched on the little trees that grew around the open space. When a great number of birds had arrived there Murri darted, with a loud cry, from his hiding-place. The startled birds rising in a flock flew wildly over the pool. Gaining an impetus by the run, and raising his arm high above his head, Murri threw his *boomerang* with all his force. It travelled some distance almost on a level with the ground, and then, with extraordinary swiftness, it darted upwards amongst the flock of birds. As the *boomerang* does not fly in a straight line, but whirls about in the most eccentric and sudden manner, the cockatoos could not escape it, and before it fell, not very far from Murri's feet, three birds had been brought fluttering to the ground.

By the time that Murri had picked up his spoils and the party was mounted it was broad day, and they could see in all their grandeur and beauty the mountains they had to cross. The lower spurs were of the colour of dull gold, from the withered grass that covered them, whilst others that were dark with the everlasting bush looked blue in contrast with them. The more distant mountains, which lay fold upon fold behind one another, were of a pure deep azure, whilst the nearer summits, which were bathed in the morning sunshine, and which seemed to pierce the very sky, were of bare rock as white as driven snow.

The colours of the near landscape were bright and varied, the tints of some of the wild grasses were reddish and rich warm browns, and the pure green of

the graceful mimosas glowed in the early sunlight against a background of dark mysterious bush. The air, after the rain, was fresh and exhilarating, and with happy hearts, forgetful of dangers past, and bravely facing difficulties to come, and singing from pure good spirits as they rode, the boys passed through the cool, grey morning shadows, as gay at heart and happy minded as young knights-errant in the youth time of the world.

Although they would not have to ascend to the greatest heights of the mountains to reach the pass by which Murri was to lead them to the Whanga valley, they had still a most difficult climb to accomplish. Their horses vastly increased the difficulty of their labours, though it must be owned that at times they scrambled like dogs up places that no horse but a colonial bred one would think of attempting. Had the boys been without them they could have reached the pass in half the time, and with less than half the labour that it took them with the horses. Of course they did not ride them—that would have been impossible—and to choose a suitable route for horses over a mountain that is covered with rocks and crags and full of ravines and great gullies is a work of not only great anxiety but of great labour.

“I wonder how Yesslett would have liked this,” sang out George to his brother, who was in front, at one place, about half-way up to the pass, where they had to clear a road for the horses.

“Much better than you think, Master George. Just because we have seen him a bit nervous at times we are apt to underrate him. I have studied him, and there is much more in him than you give him credit for. There’s real pluck in him at bottom,

I know. It has never had a chance of coming out yet, but it will be there when the time for it comes."

"Oh, I wasn't doubting dear old Yess's courage. He is three times the man he was when he came. I was only thinking that bringing horses up such a place as this would rather surprise that young Englisher."

"And you, you stuck-up young monkey, are taking all the glory of it to yourself instead of praising the strength and spring of our Australian horses."

"If you are going to argue with me over every word I say," said George, with a laugh, "I shall go on ahead and ride with Murri; he, at least, won't be able to differ from me. That is the advantage of talking with him: one has it all one's own way, and he doesn't understand half one says."

"And that, I can well understand, leads to unanimity of opinion."

As they climbed higher and higher towards the pass which lay between two gigantic glittering peaks that towered above them, like vast sentinels to guard the entrance to the unknown land beyond them, the scenery became still wilder. The rich vegetation of the lower slopes ceased, and a wilderness of crags and rocks took its place. Still there was room for the horses to pass between them, and in places the very roughness of the ground was the means of their getting along at all; had it been smooth the horses could not have kept their feet.

CHAPTER XI.

VERY NEAR TO DEATH.

ALTHOUGH they had started at sunrise the little party had not nearly reached the pass by the hour that it was time for their mid-day halt. Having to find a practicable route for the horses, and having to remove so many objects that were obstacles in their way, had taken so much longer a time than they had expected. The boys removed the saddles and loads from the horses to ease them a little, and turned them loose to find what food they could amongst the scanty growth on the rocks. There was unfortunately no water for them, for the only little watercourse near them was absolutely dry. The boys and Murri had each his own water bottle with him, but Murri, with all the incurable thoughtlessness of an Australian savage, had drunk all of his store in the early part of the day. The boys were accustomed to this absolute want of foresight in Murri, so they were not surprised, but it annoyed Alec every time he displayed it.

He had a much hastier temper than George, and although, as a rule, it was well under control in the big affairs of life, he sometimes lost it over small matters—just as most of us do.

“Confound the fellow!” said he, in an annoyed voice. “He has drunk all his water and wants some of ours. What an idiot the man is to be sure. He must suffer for his own folly and go without any.”

“Remember he is nothing but a child in mind,”

said George. "They always are. He either hopes that water will turn up somewhere or other, or, what is more likely, doesn't think at all. He just felt thirsty, and having the water at his saddle drank it up without another thought."

"I suppose that is it. But he ought not to hope to find water in such unlikely places."

"I don't know that he does. But I think you are as foolish as he is if you expect to find wisdom of that sort in such unlikely places as Murri's brain. You never will remember mother's one solitary piece of philosophy, 'Learn to *expect* disappointment.' And now that I have given my elder brother a lecture, which is very charming of me, I'll give Murri some of my water. Come along, old stoopid," he sang out pleasantly to the black.

"You won't do anything of the sort, my young Solomon," said Alec, whose face was bright again. "*I* shall. I lost my temper like a jackass, and I'll make up for it. You are quite right, most learned brother, so preach away as much as you like."

"I don't like preaching at all, any more than I like listening to sermons, and if you dare say that I preach to you, Arrick, or ever have preached, I'll come and gag you with this piece of soft damper," said George, taking up a stiff piece of the flour and water he was mixing.

Before they resumed their march, Murri pointed out to them the route they would have to follow. He remembered every yard of the road; he was wise enough in that way, although it was years since he had been there. The only way that they could go was along a narrow sort of shelf that formed a natural little path that led from the ravine they were then in,

along the wall-like face of cliff, to the top of the next great ridge above them.

After a halt of a couple of hours Alec said that if they did not get on at once he feared they would not reach the pass before sunset. It was only with great difficulty that they managed to get the horses on to the narrow shelf that was their only path out of the ravine. Murri, leading his horse, went first in the line, then came George with Vaulty, and last came Alec, driving Amber before him, and leading the one pack-horse, to which the loss of the two horses had reduced them.

The ascent was very rough and steep, and quickly raised them to a great height above the valley they had rested in. Fortunately, no green thing grew on that rocky ledge to hide the inequalities of their path; it was too stony and too exposed to the terrible heat of the tropical sun for any vegetation to live upon it. Every now and then Murri had to roll some great rock, that blocked the path, into the gulf beneath them, which, striking the crags as it wildly plunged through air, would dash itself in pieces upon the rocks below, the noise of its descent echoing from side to side of the ravine in dull reverberations.

As they mounted higher and higher the path became narrower, and the precipice upon their right hand side became so sheer, that looking over the edge of the rock they stood upon they could see straight down into the valley a thousand feet below them. It was a fortunate thing that the boys' heads were perfectly steady; had they been nervous or giddy they must have fallen from their awful height from simple fright at the depth of air below them. Alec began to blame himself for not having examined the path

before he ventured upon leading the horses on to it, for it had now become so narrow that the animals could not have turned round had the path suddenly ended or had they come upon any insuperable object across it. However, it was as well to go on boldly now that they had entered upon it and there was no help for it. He said to himself that he was every bit as thoughtless as their hare-brained guide.

They must have been climbing up this perilous track for nearly an hour, for they had been very cautious and slow in their movements for fear of an accident, when the horse that Murri was leading displaced a smallish stone which, instead of falling over the edge of the precipice and dashing itself a moment or so afterwards—with a noise made soft by the distance—on the rocks so far beneath, rolled down the path with momentarily increasing speed. George saw it coming, and, calling to Alec to look out, sprang into the air to prevent it striking his feet.

The stone passed by him without striking him, but as he retouched the ground the piece of rock on which his feet descended, loosened from the ledge by the sudden spring he had made, became detached from its position, and, quivering for a second, fell silently in a little cloud of dust and crumbling fragments over the edge of the awful chasm. A moment afterwards a dull crash rose from the valley, where it had shattered itself upon the rocks. But Alec did not hear the noise of it, for before the great stone had reached the pointed rocks his ears had been rent and every drop of blood in his body curdled by the piercing, agonising shriek that Geordie uttered as he felt himself falling from the path.

For one half second after he had leaped George

had felt the trembling of the rock beneath him, and then, before he knew what was happening, he felt himself falling with the stone. Then it was that that loud despairing shriek burst from his agonised lips. He uttered no word nor name; that wild, hopeless cry was but the expression of the deadly fear and terror that he felt.

The horror of Alec's situation was doubled by the fact that from his position on the path he could not see what had happened. The path was narrow, and between him and his brother were two horses, Amber, which he was driving before him, and Vaulty, which George had been leading. At the sound of that shrill shriek an icy sweat burst out upon him, and he felt fear creeping in among the roots of his hair and roughening his skin. For one instant he stood still as death, frozen by terror to inaction, for he knew that it was George who cried. Then with rapid throbs his bursting heart began to beat, and through his pallid lips a cry broke forth—

"Geordie, Geordie! What is it?"

No answer came to his loud call, and loosing the bridle of the horse he was leading he flung himself down on the path. He could see nothing of his brother, but he saw that the two horses before him were standing perfectly still. Creeping on hands and knees, for there was not room for him to pass between the horse and the wall of rock that rose on his left hand side, he crawled between Amber's legs. Then, with a heart that stood still for fear, he saw that Geordie had disappeared. Vaulty, who was a few yards in front of him, was standing with all four legs stretched out as though resisting some great strain, and his head was pulled down to the very edge of the path.

Not waiting to think what these things might mean, Alec crept under the sweating belly of the horse, which stood as still and stiff as though carved in stone.

Before he had passed between the fore legs of the sturdy roan he took one fearsome glance over the edge of the precipice.

Horror! What did he see?

There, a few feet below him, swinging at the end of the strained bridle reins of his horse, was Geordie, hanging and swaying horribly, with nothing between him and the awful rocks below but two thousand feet of air. As Alec looked over the edge of the precipice he saw the deathly face of his brother beneath him with strained, wide open eyes with a ghastly look of terror in them, gazing straight up at him. George's jaw was firmly clenched, and between the white, set teeth, which the retracted lips displayed, he hissed in a thrilling, awful whisper—

"Make haste! make haste! *the bridle is slipping!*"

With an indrawn shuddering breath of terror Alec pushed himself between the legs of the horse, and leaning over the edge of the precipice he grasped in his strong brown hand the two straps of the bridle that were nearest to him. Just as he was about to gather into his grasp the two other straps on the further side of the bit the leather on that side gave way, and with a sickening jerk Geordie dropped two feet further down, two feet nearer death.

Neither of the boys uttered a cry as this frightful accident happened. The struggle with death was too fierce for them to make a sound. Horribly the boy swayed about at the end of the two straining straps that alone suspended him above the vast abyss; the knuckles of his hands were white with the fearful

energy of his grasp; his head hung back, and his dark curly hair fell away from his forehead, for his hat had slipped off, and even then was floating with great bird-like swoops to the valley below. His face was white as death, and his wild eyes stared up at Alec's face with an expression of agonised entreaty in them.

Gradually Alec hauled in inch after inch of the bridle. From his awkward position on the path, lying on his chest and leaning over the edge, he was not able to exert all his strength, so that it was very slowly that he was able to raise Geordie up. The sweat stood in great beads on his brow, not merely from the labour, which was great, but from his terrible anxiety lest these straps should break as the other pair had done under a lesser strain. But the leather held firm, and he blessed in his heart the man who had done that honest tanning.

Alec saw, with renewed terror, when Geordie's tightly clasped hands were almost within reach of his own, that a look of faintness began to steal over his face, and that the eyes, which had been so widely open in his agony, were gradually closing. If but for one instant insensibility overtook him he must loose his grasp of the reins and fall. The thought of this was too awful for contemplation, and was trebly terrible now that he was so nearly within his brother's reach.

"Hold on, Geordie. Hold on a minute longer, and I can reach you. Hold on, hold on, *don't give way!*" shouted Alec, his voice almost rising to a shriek as he saw the death-like look of faintness creeping faster and faster over Geordie's face.

Alec redoubled his already incredible exertions, straining every nerve till the tendons in his bare brown neck stood out like bars and the great swelling

muscles on his arms and back seemed to turn to iron in their strength. Then, making one grand final effort, he held George's weight up by one arm alone, and stretching out the other seized his brother's wrist in a grasp of iron, just as poor Geordie's overtaxed strength gave way and his head rolled heavily to one side in total unconsciousness.

It was at this moment that Murri reached Alec's side ; he had been some way ahead of the two boys, so that, although he stopped the moment he heard George's shriek, he had not been able to reach them before. It was fortunate that he came up when he did, for with George's dead weight hanging on to his outstretched arm Alec was quite unable to haul his brother back to the path ; but with the assistance of the black boy he succeeded in raising the inanimate body of the senseless lad from his awful position, and in laying him in safety again on the rocky path.

It was only with difficulty that they revived the fainting boy ; the mental shock and the bodily strain he had undergone in falling and holding himself up by his hands for so long were more than he could recover from at once. But in an hour's time the plucky fellow was sufficiently well to go on, though he shook as with a palsy.

"Don't speak of it ; I can't bear to speak of it or think of it yet. Wait till we are away from this awful place," he had said, as soon as he could speak ; so that no word was spoken until they had reached the top of the pass and left that frightful pathway, and had descended some little way down the gentle, wooded slopes of the other side, where, by the side of a little marshy pool, they camped for the night.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WHANGA.

AFTER the terrible time he had passed through on the side of the precipice, when he and death had looked so sternly in each other's face, George's sleep was disturbed that night. Awful dreams, in which he was again swaying, at the end of the bridle strap, above the ravine, haunted his slumbers and drove away his rest. Once he had awakened himself with a shriek, and had sprung up with the sweat of terror bursting out upon him, as in his dream the straps had broken, and he had fallen through the depths of space. The cry also awakened Alec and Murri, who were sleeping by his side near the little fire they had made, for the air was very cold at night upon the mountains at the height at which they were.

Murri, who lived in life-long dread of ghosts, *debil-debils*, and evil spirits, was trembling with superstitious fear. He thought the cry had proceeded from the awful blackness round them—for the sky was overcast and the night was very dark—and cowering down he flung fresh wood on to the fire and made a cheerful blaze. Even Alec and George were glad of its bright companionship, for though they feared no invisible visitant it was eerie and wild on that lone mountain side, with the starless night sky above them, and a black stillness all around.

They sat talking for some little time before they lay down to sleep again, glad to hear each other's

voices, and to feel the fellowship of living waking men in that dark, awe-inspiring silence. George encouraged Murri, and told him that there was nothing to fear, that there was nothing there, just beyond the fire light, as the superstitious black believed. Murri had crept quite near to him, and, casting many a terrified glance around him, had told him in a low whisper, and in tones of fear, that he knew there was nothing there ; and then, with that simple poetry of thought that all savages seem in some degree to possess, he added that what had alarmed him was that the darkness itself had stirred, and was moving towards him.

"That is a grand idea and a terrible one, isn't it?" said George, turning to his brother. "To make a sort of personality of the very darkness. I believe superstition is catching, for I can myself almost believe that I see the blackness moving."

"Geordie, you are ill," said the matter-of-fact Alec. "I am sure you are, or you wouldn't talk such nonsense. Blackness moving! indeed, it is just a *draught* of it you want."

"Come a bit nearer the fire," said the boy, with a little uneasy laugh at himself. "I can't see you, and it is rather gruesome and grim to feel alone."

"I wish you could go to sleep, I am sure you are overdone," said Alec, quietly and kindly, looking earnestly in his brother's too bright eyes. "We will make a halt here to-morrow, and give you a thorough rest."

"Oh, no, not that ; Alec, I can't bear to wait. We seem to have lost so much time already. Let us get on."

"What is the hurry?"

"It is iust the gold and nothing else. Ever since

we started it has been dazzling me and dancing before me. I can see nothing else, and think of nothing else."

"And I have been the same," said his brother, with little merriment. "When I have been silent and you have thought me tired, my mind has been busy making pictures of the gold and what it will procure us."

"It is terrible, isn't it? We were quite happy before."

"Yes, and shall be again when we have got this business off our minds. I don't want heaps of money; all I wish for is to find enough to clear off the debt from Wandaroo, and start again a free man, owing no one anything."

"What a nuisance money is after all. Look at Murri there, sound asleep again already, without a penny to bless himself with, and yet perfectly happy and free from care."

"Yes, a noble sight! A thoughtless savage, without a care for to-morrow, and snoring like a hog."

"And I vote we follow his example as quickly as possible. So good-night, old miser."

"Good-night, young avarice."

Pulling their blankets up to their ears, and settling their heads more comfortably on their saddles, they fell asleep again, and this time they slumbered on till dawn without disturbance.

The descent on the other side of the pass, although difficult enough, presented none of the dangers that the ascent had done the day before, and the little party accomplished it quite early in the day. They now found themselves in a strange land of mountains and valleys, little narrow gullies of rock without a tree

or shrub about them, and hills covered so thickly with luxuriant bush and tropical vegetation as to be quite impassable for the horses. Everything was so different from the country round Wandaroo, that they might have been dropped down in another world.

It was evident that the terrible drought which the whole country had suffered from on the other side the mountains had not prevailed here, for trees and bushes, grasses, ferns, and flowers, were green and flourishing, and were running wild with that wanton luxuriance that a tropical sun engenders in a land where rain is frequent. Down some of the valleys little streams were flowing, a rare sight for Australia, and in one or two places the boys saw, for the first time in their lives, silvery cascades of water dashing and tumbling from the heights above to the clear basins below, into which their waters poured.

It was by the side of one of these streams that they had made their mid-day halt, and had cooked in his skin the young bandicoot that Alec had shot in the morning. The boys were now so excited at the thought that at last they were approaching the scene of their labours that they did not make so long a halt as usual. This did not so much matter, as the feed for the horses by the side of the stream was plentiful and good. At last, in the early afternoon, they made their way through a chaotic mass of rocks at the foot of a great grey mountain, and rounding his grand shoulder, that for some time had shut out their view of what was in front, Murri sang out—

“Missa Law, you *mil-mil*” (see) “mountain like um tooth. That fellow, Tooingoora, Whanga along o’ that fellow other side. Mine bail *pitnee yar-roman* go there this day. One more sleep.

Yarroman go along o' that fellow plenty much picannini *ingin*." (I don't think the horses can get there to-day. One more night. Horses get there soon after baby sun, or sunrise).

"Oh, let us push on, Alec," said George, impetuously. "It can't be very far, and we can perhaps get there to-night."

"It won't be any use if we do, for it will be nearly dark, and we could not do anything. But let us try; I am every bit as anxious as you are to reach the valley. Geordie, do you know I believe I should die of sheer disappointment if we find nothing."

But Murri was, as usual in these matters, quite right. They could not manage to get to the valley before sunset, though they did their best to do so. They had to camp that night with still a few miles between them and the fateful valley.

Long before sunrise next day the boys were astir. They could not rest after the first call of the laughing jackass in a neighbouring tree had told them that dawn was at hand. They were too excited at the thought that at last the day had dawned which might see them rich, rich beyond their wildest dreams, with gold enough to pay off the odious debt on Wandaroo, and more, much more, besides. It almost seemed to them, with the Whanga gully so near, that they held the gold already.

"Oh, never mind breakfast, Alec, do let us get on. A hunch of damper will do for me. I am not hungry."

"Neither am I, or I don't feel it if I really am, but I am going to make a good breakfast, and so are you, young sir, so don't make a fuss. We have a day's work before us, and it may be a hard one."

It did not take them very long to get the tea and food ready, for they had made their fire over night, against a log of wood, and it had smouldered till morning. It is always advisable to do so when camping out, as it then is not necessary to feed the fire through the night.

After an hour's ride through country that was similar to that which they had passed over the day before, they had rounded the mountain, which Murri had said was Tooingoora, and at last they reached the opening in the hills which the black boy said was Whanga. The boys' hearts beat high as they looked up the valley which had been so constantly in their thoughts, and with flushed, eager faces they turned their horses' heads towards the entrance to it.

"Geordie, I declare that now I am here, I am almost afraid to go in. I know it is idiotic, but I am so nervous that I can hardly stay in the saddle."

"Get off and sit on the ground then," said George, with a little laugh, for now that the time was at hand, when they must learn the best or the worst, he was much the calmer of the two.

"I suppose we shall put the worth of our venture to the test within the next hour. What shall we do if we find nothing after all?"

"Go home again, I suppose," said George, with more calmness than he really felt. "We shall not be a bit worse off than we were before, at any rate."

"No, but we shall have suffered a great deal all in vain, and my disappointment will be none the less keen because we are none the worse off than before."

"You, at any rate, will be worse off than before, old boy, for your hair is half burnt off, and nearly all

that fascinating moustache singed away," said George, lightly. Nearly everything had a comic side to it for him, and seeing Alec so gloomy and desponding he tried to cheer him up.

"How can you talk in that careless way of what is so important to us all?"

"To hide what I really feel," said Geordie, quickly, and looking round with a face that was serious for a moment; and then he added, as though to alter the impression his almost involuntary confession had made, "It is no use being down in the mouth *before* we find we have come in vain, so let us be cheerful till then."

"Oh, I could be cheerful enough if I knew for a certainty that we had come on a fool's errand. It is only this anxiety and uncertainty that I cannot bear."

The Whanga valley, the entrance to which the party had now reached, was a narrow opening, between two great spurs of Tooingoorra, which ran back for a mile or two till it ended in a precipitous mass of rocks at the very foot of the great mountain itself. The opening to this valley, which at its beginning was a mere rocky defile, was between two bold crags, the bases of which were clothed in dense green bush, but the summits of which were bare rocks of dazzling white quartz, that reflected the sunlight brilliantly. There was a stream flowing noisily down the centre of the valley, tumbling over the stones and boulders that blocked its course in many tiny cascades. The scenery was very impressive and grand, looking up the narrow defile, for the hills on either side of it rose in huge broken cliffs, throwing the greater part of the valley into deep shadow; but, where in one place it

widened out, and a clump of tall *quandang* trees grew beside the stream, the sun flooded it with brilliant light that fell upon the gleaming, flashing water, making it shine like burnished silver, and mellowing the warm tones of the rocks. Beyond all this, filling up the whole end of the valley, rose the great mass of the mountain high into the clear blue sky, its great white crags of quartz shining like fields of snow or ice upon its hoary summit.

The gorge—it can hardly be called a valley—was very far from level ; it rose steeply from the entrance all the way to the end of it, so that riding along it was not at all easy. Murri pointed out in several places signs of the recent presence of *myalls*, but as there were no camp fires to be seen in the gully, and as he thought the traces were several days old, he said that he believed “black fellow go away two, four days.”

The boys grew very silent as they approached the head of the valley, where they knew the hole was that the nugget had been taken from. Even George, for all his light-hearted gaiety, was quiet, and rode along with his eyes steadily fixed upon the end of the valley and his jaw squarely set, in a way that made him resemble Alec more closely than ever. Over country of the wild, rocky sort, of which the valley consisted, it is always the best plan to leave your horse to choose his own way, and both Murri and the boys followed this method.

The black boy, who was ignorant of the object of the long journey they had taken, and did not trouble his head to think why they should have travelled so far to see the Whanga, was the merriest of the party. He had no terrible anxiety about finding the gold to

trouble him, and as he had plenty to eat and plenty of "toombacco" he was as happy as the day was long. He was singing a long, monotonous *corroborree*, with an appreciation of his own efforts that was very delightful to witness, occasionally interrupting it to shout at the horse he was leading, or to call out something to the boys, who were ahead.

For some little time they had heard a dull, roaring noise in front of them, and as the boys approached the head of the valley, the air was shaken by the heavy sound of a fall of water, but they could see no cascade that could account for it. When the party was within a very short distance of the great cliff in which the gully ended, Alec pulled up his horse, turned round and said to Murri, who was slapping his naked thigh in time to the song he was singing—

"Murri, whereabouts um hole where Black Harry find um 'heavy stone'?" which was the name the blacks had given to the nugget that Harry had worn.

"Yo go on along um picannini creek, other side along o' that fellow," answered he, making a sweep with his arm and indicating a great buttress of rock which projected into the gully, and round which the stream, "um picannini creek," was flowing. "Mine believe plenty much water fill um hole like along o' that time picannini Murri come along o' Whanga," added he, carelessly.

Alec's heart sank as he understood what Murri meant. He remembered that he had told him, at the camp at Wandaroo, that when he was there before, with his tribe as a little lad, the pool was full of water. Alec had hoped that it would be all dried up after the long drought they had suffered, and, notwithstanding the stream which flowed down the valley, he had

trusted to the last that the water might not be flowing through that one particular pool.

"Geordie," said Alec, catching his brother up, "we must be prepared for the worst. Murri says that he believes the hole is filled with water, just as it was when he was a picannini and came here."

As he spoke they all rounded the great abutting rock, and saw before them a grand cascade of shining water falling in one huge column from the cliff, and plunging, amidst sheets of silvery spray, into the deep rock basin at its foot.

Murri ceased his *corroborree* for a moment, and pointing to the foaming pool said in the most unconcerned manner—

"That's um hole yo come see. Yo like um?"

CHAPTER XIII.

WAYS AND MEANS.

IT would be difficult to imagine anything more painful than the boys' feelings at that moment; the disappointment was almost more than they could bear. It is true they had built their hopes upon very slight foundations, but their disappointment was none the less keen on that account. They had thought about the gold so much, hoped for it so ardently, and undergone such dangers to reach the spot where they expected to discover it, that to find all their sanguine anticipations blighted was very bitter to them. The dream of gold had been so bright a one, and the chances of their dream coming true had seemed so probable, that they almost felt they had a right to its fulfilment—older people often feel the same about the achievement of their desires, and with as little reason.

"Well," said Alec, after a moment or two of silent contemplation of the pool and cascade which had frustrated all their plans, "Well, we have been living in a fool's paradise, and this is what comes of it."

"Beastly, isn't it?" said George. "But look here Alec, old man, perhaps after all there is no gold at the bottom of that pool, so don't let us fret about it."

"I'm not going to fret about it," said Alec, as he got off his horse, "but I am convinced that the gold *is* there. Nuggets are never found alone. That pool is a natural 'pocket,' as diggers call that sort of place."

"And we may not put our hands in it! Never mind, we have only lost what we never had."

"You jolly Irishman! Well, we may as well turn back. It is no use staying here."

"I beg to differ," said Geordie, who had thrown one leg over his horse's head, and was sitting sideways on his saddle in an idle sort of manner, and he slipped to the ground as he spoke. "At any rate let us stay here to-day, and give the horses a rest before we turn homewards."

His busy brain had already begun to think out several schemes for getting at the bottom of the pool, but he would not mention them to Alec for fear of again raising hopes that might prove false. His active mind was generally the one to devise methods and plans, which he would often have been quite unable to execute without Alec's steady-going co-operation. But these two fellows always worked so well together, and were so completely one at heart, that neither thought for one moment of taking special credit to himself for any one part that he might have originated or executed.

Taking the horses some little way down the stream, where there seemed to be more and better food for them than close to the waterfall, the boys and Murri unloaded them, and hobbling them, as usual, turned them loose. Alec suggested that if they were going to stay one night in the gully—"And the rest," thought George—they had better pitch their camp somewhere thereabouts, as they would be near the fall and yet out of reach of its deafening noise. So they arranged their goods and chattels close to one side of the gully where the steep cliff cast a grateful shade.

When this little business was satisfactorily settled—it took but a very few minutes to arrange matters—Murri, who as usual was dreaming of something to eat, and thought this an opportunity not to be neglected, asked if he might go down the valley and try to catch something. It did not matter what, for all is fish that comes to an Australian aboriginal's net. The boys did not want him for anything, so he started off with his *boomerang* and spears and throwing stick towards the clump of tall *quandang* trees they had passed when coming up the valley.

Directly that George saw Alec engaged upon making some alteration in the stuffing of one of the pack saddles, which had begun to chafe the back of the horse that carried it, he started off by himself to make a more careful survey of the pool and the waterfall. He wished to go alone, so he walked off without saying anything to his brother. Alec, although he had said that he should be quite cheerful if he knew the worst, seemed very much depressed at the failure of all his hopes, and sat rather gloomily over his work. He was paying close attention to what he was doing, for he hated careless work of any kind, and did not see Geordie leave the camp.

The place certainly did not present a very hopeful appearance when George came to examine it. The waterfall poured in one straight column from the top of the perpendicular cliff, and dashed itself into the pool beneath, which again overflowed to the stream below in a little cascade, from the narrow lip of rock which formed the front edge of the basin. George thought that the scene was a very beautiful and grand one now that he could look at it with calmer eyes. The ravine, at the far end of

which the cascade fell, was very narrow, so that the lofty cliffs on either side shut out the direct sunshine, except at mid-day, when the sun was just overhead. The whole place was dim and full of shadow, and the sound of the falling water and the coolness of the air, moistened by the drifting showers of misty spray, made it a pleasant retreat from the glare and tropical heat of the ardent day beyond its limits. The rocks for the most part were bare of vegetation, but in one or two places near the fall itself masses of tall grasses and ferns grew with luxuriant greenness, and along the top of the cliff from which the cascade fell a line of bushes grew, and creeping plants, which hung far down the rock, swayed by the current of air made by the great mass of falling water.

The water looked cool and inviting, and George thought he would have a dip into it before he began his exploration. He thought that by so doing he might discover how deep the pool was. The basin into which the waterfall plunged was some five or six feet above the level of the stream, into which the water flowed by a second and much smaller cascade. Undressing—a work that did not take him very long—on the bank of the stream, George scrambled up by the side of the little waterfall, and stood on the narrow wall of rock that confined the waters of the basin, his well-made muscular body and legs looking strangely fair when compared with his red and sun-browned face and neck and arms. He stood for one moment with one foot in the water—how hot the sun was on his naked body—and then plunged into the pool.

He found that he could just touch bottom near the place where the water flowed out, but that nearer

the middle of the pool it was beyond his depth. He did not go under the fall, though he went close to it, for the volume of water was so great and fell in so heavy a stream. Standing, a few minutes afterwards, in the sunshine to dry himself before he dressed again, he made a rough mental calculation, and found that the parts of the pool he had been able to bottom were about on a level with the stream. With a pleased little nod he sprang lightly down the rocks, which were hot to his naked feet, and scrambled into his clothes.

As soon as he was dressed he walked to the face of the great cliff over which the water plunged, and began to examine it to find a place where he might climb up. The rock near the fall was quite too steep for any one to ascend, but a little way from it, where the ravine curved, George found a place up which he thought he could manage to scramble. As he was strong and a quite fearless rock climber, he was often able to conquer difficulties that most people would have found insuperable. Jamming tightly on to his head the cap he had extemporised the night after he lost his felt hat at the precipice, two days before, George began to climb. It was a work for arms as well as legs, for the cliff was so steep in places that he had actually to haul himself up by his hands ; but Geordie was at home in this sort of climbing, and nimbly scaled up places that from below looked absolutely perpendicular.

It took even Geordie some time to get to the top, for the cliff was higher than it appeared to be from the ravine, but at last he was able to grasp the stout stem of a ti-bush that grew on the edge of the crag, and holding this and throwing his chest on to the flat

ground at the top he was able to haul himself up. He sprang to his feet at once, for he was in such perfect condition that even the violent exertion he had just made had not put him out of breath. He found himself on a little piece of comparatively level ground which rose, at first gradually, and then by a steeper incline, till it joined the great bulk of Tooingoorra, which towered, majestic and grim, before him. The ground, just where he was, was covered with a thick and tangled growth of scrub, through which he could hear the sound of the swiftly running stream, which poured itself with a roar over the edge of the height.

George made his way between the bushes with some little difficulty, for they were so matted together with a strong wiry sort of creeper, and in a moment or two he reached the edge of the stream. He found that it was flowing very rapidly, as though preparing for the leap it was about to make, along a rocky watercourse, which at present was a great deal too wide for its requirements, but the whole of which in flood times it would probably occupy.

George examined the bed of the stream very carefully, walking up it some little way and then back again to the place where the water plunged over the edge of the rock in one great smooth sweep. He seemed to observe one part more than any; it was where a dried-up arm of the watercourse branched out from the side of the running stream; it would evidently be converted into a stream itself if only a very little more water came down from the mountain, for its sandy bed was only just above the level of the one that was then flowing. After examining the nature of the ground just there, George gave a little satisfied laugh, and said, in a deeply mysterious manner—

"Yes, I believe this will do."

By the way he poked about among the loose rocks and stones, and scratched in the sand with a short stick he had cut in the scrub, it looked as though he were doing a little prospecting for gold on his own account. But the thought that there was gold above the fall as well as below it had not entered his head. Had he been a practical gold digger he would have recognised at once, from the nature of the stones about him, that he was amongst the gold-bearing rocks, or rather that the stones were fragments, brought down from the mountain, of auriferous quartz.

Having satisfied himself of the practicability of his plan by this personal survey, he leaped across the stream, and keeping along the edge of the cliff he soon stood above the place in the main ravine where they had camped. He saw his brother below him putting the finishing stitches to his work, and taking up a little pebble he threw it so that it almost dropped on the hat of the unconscious Alec. Geordie greeted him with a stave of a song as Alec leaped to his feet and looked around, and danced a little *corroborree*, all of his own invention, so near to the edge of the cliff that Alec was almost frightened out of his senses.

"Come down, you young ape!" he yelled.

"Ape yourself," replied Geordie; but he instantly swung himself over the edge and began descending at a break-neck pace, and in a moment he stood by the side of his brother.

"You'll break your neck as sure as fate if you fling yourself about like that. I never saw such a fellow as you are; you are just like a cat on your feet. Where have you been?"

"In the waterfall, up the waterfall, and over the waterfall, and I have come to the conclusion that the waterfall is but a poor creature, and that we can manage it after all."

"Manage it! What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, and I think you will agree with me when you hear my plan, and have examined the stream before it falls from the cliff."

"Plan! what plan?"

"Let me get something to eat first, and then I'll tell you all about it. I had no breakfast this morning, and I want to 'patter um bittee damper,' as Murri would say. Come and sit down on this rock, it is a particularly soft and comfortable one, and well in the shade. Well, sir, this is my idea," said he, throwing off his cap and giving his still damp hair a little impetuous shake that was very characteristic of him. "We must get to the bottom of that pool. It is too idiotic to have come all this way on purpose, and then to go back without doing it."

"And how are you going to do it—dive?"

"Be quiet, don't interrupt," said George, putting down by the side of him the food which in his earnestness he had forgotten to touch. "I will tell you what I believe we can do. It will take some time, and a lot of hard work, but of course that doesn't matter."

"No, of course not."

"We must divert the stream from its present channel and send it pouring over the cliff in another place. I have been up on to the top and have found a branch of the watercourse which we can use if we can manage to dam up the present channel."

Alec had sat listening, perfectly silent up till now, but at this point his admiration broke out.

"What a splendid idea! When did you think of it?" And then, as the thought struck him that diverting the stream would not solve their difficulty, he suddenly added, "But that won't empty the pool for us, that will be as full as ever."

"You jolly old muff, do you think I had not thought of that?"

"Well, and how do you propose to empty it?"

"Drink it all, I suppose," said Geordie, with a bright laugh at the sudden change from hope to doubt that took place in Alec's face. But, seeing how anxious he looked, he laid one hand on his brother's knee to give emphasis to what he said. The novelty and boldness of his own idea had greatly excited him, though he tried to carry it off lightly; and when he spoke his voice was lowered, as though there were any one within some hundreds of miles who could overhear him.

"No," he said, "the pool is no great difficulty after all if we can only carry out my scheme. The bottom of it is on a level with the stream, except just in the middle, where it is deeper, and the wall of rock over which the second little waterfall flows is but a thin one. If we can break through that all the water in the pool, or nearly all of it, will rush out into the stream."

"It will be slow work, but we ought to be able to do it."

"We will do it, and not so particularly slowly after all, for I mean to drill a hole into the rock and blast it up with gunpowder. Margaret little thought when she told us, before we left, to be sure to take plenty of powder, to what a purpose we should put it."

"But how much have we?"

"Plenty. We have used very little since we started."

"Geordie," said Alec, as he rose from the stone, "in my opinion you are a regular genius. Yes, you are; don't deny it."

"Oh, very well," laughed George, "I will be one if you like. It is easy enough to be a genius if that is all that is wanted. I've only just thought of a sort of plan, and, mind you, I shall leave all the details to you, for you always do things so much better than I do."

"Not I; but I am ready to begin at once."

"It is too hot yet, there is not a bit of shade up there on the top of the cliff. We had better wait till a little later in the afternoon."

"Let's go and examine the pool at any rate. It is not too hot for that, and I want to have a look at that wall of rock. So come on."

When they had returned to the camp after their visit to the waterfall, they found that Murri had got back. All that he brought was one kangaroo rat and a parrot. A very poor result for so long a morning's hunting.

"This all you get along um gully?" asked George, pointing to the black fellow's very scanty spoils.

Murri shook his head, and said, "Mine kill pigeums, two pigeums, along o' *quandang*s. Murri plenty much hunglee. Mine go make fire, cook um pigeums, and mine *patter*" (eat) "um bofe."

This speech was so characteristic of the Australian black that neither of the boys was at all surprised at it. Although Murri was in many ways an exceptional specimen of the aboriginal race, it was not to be

supposed that he should be free from all their faults and failings. Generosity can hardly be expected to be found among the virtues of a man who, like his ancestors for countless generations, has always thought of himself first, and of supplying his own requirements to the full before he gives away of his superfluity. Murri had killed the birds by his own skill and with his own strength, and who had so good a right as he to cook and eat them? That was what he himself would have said had he been asked, and he felt no shame in owning to George that he had cooked and eaten them himself. It was as useless to talk to him of generosity or self-sacrifice as it would be to try to make a man blind from his birth understand the meaning of colours.

Later in the afternoon, about two hours before sunset, the boys again walked towards the waterfall. Alec, who was not nearly so good a climber as George, utterly refused to climb up the cliff at the place Geordie had first ascended it. He said that he had some respect for his bones if Geordie had not, and climb up that cliff, which was no better than a stone wall, he would not. It was with some little difficulty that they found any less steep place, but they did at last discover one, some little way to the right hand side of the fall.

As soon as Alec had been shown the channel that George thought best for their purpose, he began to work. He was never one to spare himself when there was a difficult task on hand, and he flung himself into this new labour with all his usual ardour. George found his energy contagious, and they worked to such purpose that when they left off, some little time before sunset, they had collected a great pile of rocks

at the edge of the stream with which they intended to begin their dam next day.

As it was evident, from the amount of work they had before them, that their stay in the valley would be of some duration, the boys determined to make more extensive preparations for camping than they usually did. It was almost too late that night to do anything, but they devoted the next day to building themselves a sort of little hut, which would not only shelter them from the heat by day and from the heavy dews of night, but would serve as some sort of protection if they were again attacked by *myalls*.

The one great danger in travelling in the wild parts of Queensland is the probability of being attacked by the fierce black natives, and every traveller in that little known country should be constantly on his guard. It is only natural that the native black races should retaliate upon the white intruders, at whose hands they have suffered so much ; and as they have not the courage, or indeed the weapons, to enable them to attack a well-peopled station, they wait until they have a chance of murdering a solitary shepherd, or surrounding and surprising a small party when travelling away from civilised parts.

It was the thought of their exposed situation in case of an attack that guided Alec in his choice of a position for their camp. After examining the gully on both sides, he found a place that he thought admirably suited to his purpose. On the opposite side of the stream from that on which they had first encamped, there was a little opening in the side of the ravine. It was only a sort of wide crack in the rock, down which perhaps in times of heavy rain a

little waterfall might flow. The width of it across the opening was about ten feet, and it was about the same, or a little more, in depth, at which distance the two walls of rock met at an angle.

Alec, who was a practical fellow, saw that this would give him two sides to his house, and, that if he built a wall of some sort across the front of it, he would have the shell of a comfortable, although triangular, shelter. Without waste of further time he and George set to work to collect a number of the large stones that were scattered thickly along all the edge of the stream and in it. With these they slowly (for the work was none of the easiest beneath a blazing tropical sun) built a wall about four feet high across the front of the little opening. They knew, from the previous day's experience, that they could not expect much of that sort of work from Murri, so they set him to chop down a good big pile of brushwood from the scrub that grew a little way down the gully. To this kind of labour Murri was much more accustomed, as the natives build their *gunyahs* of boughs of trees and brushwood. He could use a hatchet quite as expertly as the boys, and in a short time had cut quite as much as they would want for their purpose.

It took them the best part of the day to get their house finished, for the stones of their wall would often slip when the boughs were being forced in between them, and the covering in of the roof took some little time, as they had great difficulty in fixing the thick ends of the branches they used for that purpose in the rocky sides of their house. But by working well they managed to get it done, and had installed themselves and all their possessions, saddles, guns, provisions, and stores of every sort—not a great quantity, by-the-by—

in their new camp before the sun had set. It certainly was more comfortable than sleeping without any shelter, for the nights felt cold after the great heat of the days, and the dews that fell were quite heavy enough to wet their blankets and clothes right through.

The floor of the "humpie," as the boys called it, using the word that in Australia means hut or house or hovel, indiscriminately, was quite dry, and the roof looked thick enough to keep out all wet, so that they were in no small degree satisfied with their work when at last it was finished.

"I say, Geordie," said Alec to his brother, who was busy in front of their newly-finished home making some Johnny cakes for their supper, "I've been thinking that it would be foolish for us to announce the fact of our presence here by firing our guns off. The noise would very probably be heard by some wretched tribe of *myalls*, and they would be bouncing here in no time to see what the row was all about; and I think we have had enough of them for one journey."

"I quite agree with you, most learned sir," said George, lifting up one floury hand and pushing his cap back that he might see his brother the better; "I don't want any more *myalls* just yet. But why do you make these wise remarks?"

"Because I should like something more for my supper than Johnny cakes and part of a tinned salmon. I was going to try to get a shot at something, but I think we had better send Murri, whose shooting isn't quite so noisy as ours. Hullo, Murri," he added, turning round to that worthy person, who was hugging his knees by the side of the fire, "you go kill some-

thing. Mine want pigeon, bandicoot, cockatoo, anything. *Burrima* " (quickly), "you bail go *patter* him all along yourself this time." (Don't you eat him by yourself this time.) "If you do," he added, dropping into his own vernacular, "I'll jolly well punch your head."

"You had better go with him. I won't put the Johnny cakes in till you come back."

"Yes, that will be the safest way, and I can have a look at the horses and see that they have not strayed."

Murri was willing enough to go. A new spirit seemed to possess him when he was engaged in hunting or work of that kind, and his expressionless face would light up, and a new fire would shine in his eyes. He seized his *boomerang* and other weapons, which were lying by the side of him, and sprang to his feet to accompany Alec down the ravine.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUILDING THE DAM.

THE next morning, almost as soon as it was light, the boys began the serious work of building the dam across the stream. They chose a place a little way below the branch channel into which they wished to turn the water, where the stream was rather wider than it was lower down, but where also it was shallower. They selected this place for the reason that it was much less difficult to work in shallow water than in deep, and this fact more than compensated them for the extra work entailed upon them by the greater width of the stream. The work was very heavy, and only the thought of the great reward they hoped to reap from their exertions could have made them persevere in it. The whole proceeding was a mystery to Murri, who could conceive no incentive sufficiently powerful to make men work so hard as the two Laws did.

"What for you put plenty much stone along o' water? Yo bail stop him. That fellow strong," said he, pointing to the stream. "Yo go chewt" (shoot) "um kangaroo, mine find chewgah bag" (sugar bag; a nest of wild honey, of which there is plenty to be found in the bush), "that *boudgerree carwabawn*, stop um water, that hard work, bail gammon bong."

Thus argued the black philosopher, who disregarded gold—being ignorant of its worth—and tried to make the boys see things in the same

light that he did. It must be confessed that he was not purely disinterested in thus painting to them the superior delights of shooting and tracking the wild bees down to their nests, for he hated work of any continuous sort, and Alec had set him to cut great lumps and sods of the tussocky grass that grew by the sides of the stream in the ravine. These Alec meant to use to fill in the gaps between the stones that formed the foundation of their dam.

It was slow and rather disheartening work, for although the boys worked steadily their progress that first day seemed very small. Many of the stones and rocks that they used had to be carried for some distance, and the force of the water as it poured down the steep incline, before it leaped to the valley below, was so great that it was a constant effort for them to keep their feet on the smooth water-worn rock upon which they stood. Many of the stones, too, which they had carried with such labour, and placed in position so carefully, were swept away by the force of the water directly that they loosed them, and rumbling heavily along the course of the stream plunged with a splash, heard above the roar of the waterfall, into the pool below. But neither of them had, from the first, expected to find the work an easy one, and they went on stolidly replacing, with a larger and heavier stone, every one that was swept away, and showed such dogged determination and pluck that it was evident they did not mean to be beaten.

They had been enormously cheered towards the end of the day, just when both of them began to feel very fagged and tired from their continuance at the unaccustomed labour, by a discovery that they

made. They had almost succeeded in laying all the stones necessary for the foundation of their dam, and thought of knocking off work for that day; but there was still one place that was a little weak, and Alec was anxious to strengthen it before they went down to the humpie for rest and supper.

"There's that one place near the bank that is still a bit shaky, Geordie; I should like to fix that up before we give over."

"Oh, bless the thing!" said George, in a voice whose tones conveyed but little benison. "We have put a ton of rock there if we have put an ounce."

"Don't bother about it if you are tired. I dare say you are—it has been a hard day. I can do it quite well."

"As though I should let you lug those great rocks about by yourself! Come on. I was only having a bit of a growl—it eases my stiff back."

"Well let us get that big white stone up there—the current can never sweep that away."

"All right; a thumping big one for the last."

Saying this they stepped out of the water and hobbled over the stones, which were very painful to their feet, the latter being tender from remaining in the water so long. The stone was a great lump of white quartz, and it lay at the edge of the rapid stream.

"I say, it *is* heavy!" said George.

They both stooped and put their hands to it together, and, loosening the stone from the bed it had made for itself in the pebbles, they rolled it over. As they did so George uttered a wild yell of delight.

"Alec, Alec, *it is gold!*"

He was so overcome with this sudden proof that their hopes were not all vain that he sat straight



"HE WAS SO OVERCOME THAT HE SAT STRAIGHT DOWN INTO
THE STREAM." (p. 130.)

down into the stream with a splash, and, laughing hysterically, stayed there patting the gold-studded face of the stone with the palm of his hand.

Alec, who as a rule was not so excitable as George, was himself unable to say anything for a moment. His face became quite white as he seemed to see his dreams realised before him.

"Yes," he said at last, as he uttered a great sigh of relief, "it is gold, real gold, and thank Heaven for it. You don't know," he added, as he turned to his brother and pulled him up from the water, "how terrible my doubts have been that after all we might not find it."

The delight of these two young fellows, the one a boy and the other just verging upon manhood, at finding their dream of gold likely to be fulfilled would have been a horrible and unnatural thing to have witnessed had it been merely a greed for wealth that possessed them, but as it was nothing but the expression of their desire to be honestly independent again it lost all its ugliness. As Alec said, with a happy little tremble in his voice—

"We shall be *free* men again ! As long as that loathsome debt was unpaid I could never have an easy hour ; and now I hope, I believe, we shall be able to pay it all off and owe no man a shilling."

"Hurrah, hurrah !" sang out Geordie, a wild exultation giving his voice a noble ring ; "we shall be able to call Wandaroo our own again."

They both felt from that moment that they could go on working all night ; all their fatigue had vanished, and a desire to finish their work possessed them. But the sun would be setting soon, and they knew they could do but little more that night ; so

they only rolled and carried the great piece of gold-laden rock to their dam and strengthened the one weak place with it.

When they had scrambled down the cliff and had got back to the front of the humpie they found that Murri had returned from the *quandang* trees, whither the boys had sent him, with a plump, richly plumaged pigeon and a parrot. These Murri was already cooking.

"You chewt um bird up along o' there?" asked that intelligent gentleman, who thought that all exclamations of joy must be the expressions of delight of a hungry stomach at the near prospect of food. "Mine heard Missa Law give one coo-ec. Why yo sittum down in um water?"

"Because I very much fear, my dear Murri—and I blush to confess it—that I was quite unable to keep upon my feet."

"*Yohi*," (yes) grinned the savage, who did not understand a word.

The boys were able next morning to proceed with filling in the cracks and openings in their dam with sods of grass and earth, for they found that the rocks and stones had stood firm. They left an opening a foot or so wide at the side of the dam, through which the waters might flow till they were ready to close the embankment. They found that the pieces of tussocky grass roots, that Murri had cut the day before, were too dry to be of much service, and they had to carry up, with great labour, large lumps of the damp sort of turf that grew in the little marshy place down the stream. These did admirably, and seemed to fit themselves firmly in between the stones.

It took a long time to cut and transport to the top of the cliff all these heavy pieces of sod, for they had to use their arms so much in the climbing that it was difficult to carry more than one or two pieces of it at one time. But the boys were so excited that they toiled on nearly all the morning without a break, and resumed the work, after their mid-day rest, at about four o'clock, with unwearied zeal. Murri looked on in dumb astonishment at such incredible behaviour.

Some little time before evening set in they were ready to fill up the last opening. The rest of the dam was finished, every little crack and cranny that they could find had been filled up with a turf which was well pressed home, they had strengthened it here and there, and, so far, the work held good. The moment to try its firmness would be when the last opening was closed and the dam would have to resist the full weight of the water. The boys had collected a great pile of rocks and stones and large and small sods of turf and earth by the side of the narrow opening, through which the whole force of the stream now rushed. They stood with a huge lump of stone hanging just over the opening.

"Are you ready, Geordie?"

"Yes."

"Let go."

With a mighty splash the stone fell just where it was wanted, and without waiting a second both boys began piling on and round it lumps of rock and turf and large rounded pebbles. It was an exciting moment, for the flow of the waterfall had entirely ceased, and the strange silence was fraught with a significance in their ears that was far greater and more

imposing to them than was the loud roar to which they were accustomed. Wildly they continued piling on turf, and then lumps of rock to fix it, till the opening was filled up to the level of the rest of the dam.

It was an anxious time for them as they saw the water rising, rising rapidly, towards the top of their little embankment. In one or two places it began to creep in a little wriggling streak over the topmost layer of turf and rock ; but it was never allowed to flow, for one or other of the boys rushed into the water, that now reached half-way up their thighs, and added more material and jammed it firmly down. Would the dam hold out? Could it withstand the enormous pressure of the water? Yes, *yes*. Hurrah! See there, a silver streak is flowing into the old disused channel which the boys have so carefully cleared for it. Every moment, every second it grows broader, deeper, and in a short time a splash is heard where the new waterfall is beginning to pour itself over the cliff, not into the pool but on to the dry hot rocks of the gully some little way to one side of the basin. Every moment this noise grows louder and louder, till in a very few seconds the roar of this new cascade is as deep and thundering as the silenced voice of its dead brother, and the water is pouring down the gully along a fresh course till it joins the stream again just at the bend of the ravine.

It is a proud moment for those young engineers, and they feel that glow of honest satisfaction in successful work which is worth so much more than other peoples' praises, that are so often given for what one does not value.

"Well, I suppose we have done half the work," said Alec, as they sat by the fire in front of the humpie when they had finished their supper.

"Yes, but it is the harder half that is left to be done. It will take a long time to drill a hole into the rock."

"I don't know how we are going to do it, for we haven't a chisel or a bit of steel that we can use for one."

"Oh, yes we have," said George, whose more imaginative mind saw to what different uses one article might be put. It is this imaginative quality that makes a man an inventor and a devisor of new methods of working, when an unimaginative person, though perhaps much more learned, will continue using old ones just for want of the illumination that would show him new and better means of obtaining the same result.

"What is it?"

"Why the steel extracting rod that is fastened to your revolver. We can harden and temper it, after we have beaten it roughly into shape with our tomahawks."

It was with this primitive tool that they set to work next day to bore holes into the wall of rock which retained the water in the pool. The rock was all green and slimy with a sort of soft water moss, which they had to scrape away before they could reach the stone itself. The old course of the stream was only to be recognised by a few little pools of water that lay along its track, and by the darker colour of the wet stones which the sun had not yet dried. The stream flowed along its new bed as naturally as though it had never known another.

Fortunately for the boys the rock they had to work upon was not very hard. It was a sort of dark blue slate; had it been quartz, the same as were the upper rocks of the mountain, it would have taken them weeks to make any impression on it. Impeded as they were by the want of proper tools, it took them nearly two days to make a hole deep enough for their first blasting. They knew it was useless to make a great wide hole to place their powder in, as the explosion would then have no force, so they had, with the utmost patience, chipped and drilled and scraped at the rock until they had bored a sort of rough tube eight or nine inches deep and a couple of inches across.

Into this they packed a heavy charge of powder, and rammed it tightly home, and then, as they had no proper fuse, they laid a train of damp powder to it. Neither of the boys knew anything about mining or blasting, so that they could only act in the way that their common sense told them was best. Alec set fire to this train and then ran to where George and Murri were standing at a safe distance. In a few moments a tremendous explosion rent the air, and a vast cloud of heavy smoke filled the end of the ravine. They could hear the falling of heavy lumps of stone, but as there was no great rush of water down the old course of the stream they knew that they had not succeeded in breaking through the wall of rock.

When the clinging white clouds of smoke had slowly rolled up and away they went to the pool to examine what damage the explosion had done, and they found that it had torn and shattered the rock to a great extent, but that as yet the barrier stood

firm. They were hardly disappointed at this result, for they knew the rock to be of some considerable thickness, and had not expected to break it all down at once. With his usual energy Alec immediately began to clear away the *débris*, and the heavy vapour had hardly floated off before he was at work again, chipping and pecking away to make another blast hole.

Murri who had been capering about in childish pleasure, that was tinged with delightful fear, at the noise of the explosion, came up to Alec, from the very safe distance to which he had run when the charge exploded, and said—

“Mine *pitnee*” (I believe, or think), “*myalls*, come here along o’ that debil-debil. *Myalls* hear um plenty much long way ; um say debil-debil along o’ Whanga, and come see what him do. *Myalls* come daytime plenty much, afraid along o’ dark-dark.”

This was an anxiety that was no novelty to the boys ;—they had thought that some such result was probable, but, as the work had to be done, they did it, without letting fears of possible eventualities interfere with the business in hand. That night passed quietly without signs of the nearness of any *myall*, and they began to hope that no tribe had been near enough to the valley to hear the explosion.

The next morning—the seventh day that they had been in the Whanga—the two boys returned to their work of blasting the rock. The sun had not risen when they left the humpie, and a cold mist hung above the water, like a ghostly stream floating in the air, and following every curve and bend of its prototype beneath. There was need for haste, for their provisions, that had been so decreased by Prince

Tom's theft, were running short; the flour was almost gone; and if it had not been for the fresh meat that Murri obtained for them they would have had to go back before this.

"What have you got left?" said Alec, when George told him the state of affairs.

"Well, there is really not more than four days' full rations of flour, but we must put ourselves on short commons, and we can last out eight or nine days then, if we can manage to get plenty of fresh provisions. We must keep Murri at it, and see that he doesn't eat up three parts of what he catches before he brings the spoil home to us. I have started him off already."

"Not only that, but we will work a bit harder, and hurry on matters as much as possible. I think we can have our second explosion to-day, and that will about do the job. I declare, when I think how much depends upon what we may or may not find at the bottom of that pool, I can hardly go on with the work."

"It is disgusting to have to go on tinkering away at this fiddling little hole," said George, who was taking a spell at the chisel, "when all the time one wants to do some good slogging work with one's muscles that would let the steam off a bit. Don't you feel like that?"

"Yes; and once or twice, after I have been chipping away for about half an hour, just as though I were breaking the tops of eggs, and have been rewarded for all my pains by loosening a bit of rock about the size of a pea, I have caught the top of the chisel two or three such thundering whacks that it is a wonder to me it hasn't doubled up."

About mid-day they had sunk the bore-hole to a sufficient depth for their purpose and, quite silent

from excitement, they proceeded to fill it with a huge charge of powder. They generally stopped working at this time, for the heat in the middle of the day was very great ; but this morning both boys were too tremblingly anxious to see the result of their labours to let heat, or fatigue, or hunger, interfere with what they were doing. Carefully ramming the powder down, and laying the train to it, they applied the fire-stick that Geordie had run to fetch from their smouldering fire.

They hurried back from the mine to a safe place a little way down the ravine, and stood there awaiting the explosion. Alec, whose face was rigid with anxiety, stood leaning upon George, with his arm round his shoulders. Geordie, for all his excitement, had time to feel how icy cold was his brother's hand and to think how nervous and troubled the poor fellow must be for his hands to be like that. They stood thus, perfectly still and silent, for a moment or two ; it seemed an age to their excited fancy. The spark of creeping fire advanced slowly along the train, and then, with a dull, low roar, the mine exploded, and for a second they heard nothing but the rending of rock and the crashing of great pieces of stone as they fell on the crags. A little later they heard the patter, like rain, of the smaller fragments, that had been thrown higher into the air, as they fell, with a sharp little rattle, on the rocks.

Then the boys heard a sound of seething, rushing water, and by the time they had started to run towards the pool they saw a foaming mass of tumbling water emerge from the grey curtain of the heavy smoke, and tear wildly and rapidly along the old course of the stream.

They knew that the waters had escaped from the pool.

Stirred by one impulse, the two boys started to run to the pool before the suffocating cloud of vapour had cleared off. By the time they had reached the wall of rock, in which the last explosion had made a wide breach, the air was pure enough for them to breathe, and they scrambled up the rocks, and stood by the side of the opening, through which they could hear the last of the water flowing. Although they could breathe they could not yet see, for the dense vapour, which seemed to drift above the surface of the basin, had not all disappeared.

They stood there, motionless, waiting for the air to clear itself. Their hearts were beating tumultuously, and their chests were high with anxiety and excitement. They stood just as when they were children together, Geordie with his hand on Alec's arm, both divining what the other felt, though no word was uttered.

It was not very long that they had to wait, for a faint wind stirred in the gully, rustling the leaves of the shrubs and creepers on the cliff, which wafted away, as though a veil were being withdrawn, the cloud of blue-grey mist that had hung about the hollow of the basin. The boys eagerly looked down.

There below them, in amongst the stones, half buried in the sand, shining up through the little pools of water that still remained among the rocks, were lumps and nuggets of the precious metal. They looked, and looked again. Yes, there, beyond a doubt, gleaming in the hot, strong sunlight, was the dull, yellow gold they sought. It almost seemed to their wildly excited minds that the rocky basin was

covered with it, for look where they would they could see the yellow gleam of gold, pure gold.

It was Geordie who spoke first. He was still clutching Alec's arm, with a grasp that must have been painful in its intensity. A little half sob of emotion and delight caught his breath as he said—

“It's gold, Alec, it's gold! A fortune, a great fortune, is lying at our feet!”

He held one brown arm eagerly stretched out, and pointed to the empty pool beneath him, as though to emphasise what he said.

Whilst the words were on his very lips, and before Alec had had time to answer, a loud and piercing cry behind them made them turn their heads, and there, rushing wildly towards them along the rocky ravine, was the black figure of Murri, leaping great stones and boulders, plunging through the stream, and running as they had never seen him run before. His breath was almost gone, but he was just able to cry out in strange, hoarse tones, that they could hardly recognise as his—

“Run, run, *burrima*, get um gun. *Myall* have come. Um black fellow along o' this place, one, two minute!”

CHAPTER XV.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

HEARING this cry, the boys turned and leaped down from the rocks, and joined Murri, who, panting for breath, and half frightened to death, was standing by the stream, down which a little water still was draining. He told them, in his queer English, that he had been following a wounded kangaroo rat, just on the other side of the *quandang* trees, when he had looked up suddenly, and found that the ravine was peopled with *myalls*, not a quarter of a mile from him. They had seen him, he said, for as he turned to run a great many men had started in pursuit. He could not say how many, for an Australian cannot count above four, but he told them, "Plenty much black fellow run kill Murri, bail cotch him."

Without wasting time on useless speech, the boys turned, and whistling to Como, who was lying in the shade of a great rock, they ran towards the humpie. It was bitter, very bitter, thus to have the cup dashed from their lips just when it was raised to them; it was hard that, just when success seemed secured, they were not able to reap the fruits of all their toil. But neither Alec nor George was of the sort to rail at Fortune, and without a backward glance or an angry word they hurried away.

It is to be feared that this extremely sensible behaviour was not prompted by a feeling of what was right and dignified; the two lads were far too

frank and human to feel anything but angry and provoked at the evil turn things had taken. They were very natural fellows, and not at all angelic, and therefore they felt this sudden check very keenly, but they were possessed with the common sense that, in a time of danger, springs from self-reliance and courage, and they knew that their only chance lay in getting to their arms before they were cut off by the enemy. There was no time to think of the gold, for their very lives might be at stake, and the boys, very wisely, considered their lives of far more value to them than tons of any metal, however precious it might be.

Racing madly along, over rocks and sandy shingle, quite regardless that the mid-day sun was pouring down its burning rays upon them, and that the air of the close gully was quivering in the heat, they reached the shelter of the humpie at last. It was only just in time, for as they darted through the opening in the low stone wall that barricaded the house eight or nine great black fellows came within spear-shot. One of them threw a slender spear at them just as Alec sprang into shelter; it struck the fire-log, just beyond the humpie, raising a little shower of sparks. The instant that they were inside the humpie the boys seized their guns, which were always loaded, and put a heap of cartridges on to the floor near to them both. They had their guns at full cock, and had covered the *myalls* in much less time than it takes to tell of it, but they did not fire. Alec spoke, without lifting his head or raising his eye from the sight of his gun.

"Don't fire, Geordie. I can't bear killing these poor beggars. I can't forget those we shot before, and that time it was in self-defence."

"So is this."

"No, not yet. They may be friendly, and mean us no harm whatever."

Whilst the boys were thus hurriedly speaking the *myalls* had stopped in their advance, and stood talking together. It was just as Alec had hoped—they were perfectly friendly, and wished them no harm; in fact, they had not known that there were any white men present till they saw Alec and George rush past them, and they were overwhelmed with curiosity to examine them and their wondrous clothes and property. It is the coast aborigines, and those that are near the English runs, that so hate the white man. He it is who has settled on their land without their permission; driven away the kangaroo and emu by introducing cattle, which not only deprive the black men of their food, but trample and pollute their springs and water-holes into morasses of mud and filth; and in return has brought the poor savage what he calls civilisation, but which is really extermination.

No wonder that the poor childish native retaliates, and endeavours vainly to stem or drive back the irresistible wave which advances upon him, and which must inevitably sweep him and his whole race away. It is different with the quite wild *myall*, who has not yet learned what is the fate that follows so closely on the white man's heels. He, poor creature, after the first shock of terror has subsided, often receives the pale stranger well, or, at least, without animosity, and shows him where water is to be found, and which is the best road for him to follow.

Just so it was with this tribe of Wyobree warriors; they had seen Murri run away from the mere sight of them, and had instinctively started in pursuit. We are all alike in that—a remnant of our former savagery,

perhaps. Let anything start away and run from us, and instantly we feel the desire to follow and catch, a natural instinct that all these generations of our so-called civilisation have failed to stamp out.

It seemed to the boys an age whilst the Wyobree men (as they afterwards learned they were called) stood thus talking. They still kept them covered with their guns, and the fact that the blacks stood so calmly there—out of spear range, the *myalls* knew—told the boys that they were ignorant of the deadly power of fire-arms. Murri, with all the hatred of the partly civilised savage for the totally wild, kept urging Alec and George to fire upon the blacks.

“Chewt um, Alec, chewt um, Missa Law. What for you bail kill um? *Myall* kill white fellow plenty much time. What for yo bail chewt um black fellow dead bong?”

But notwithstanding these pressing invitations to slaughter a few of his countrymen, the boys reserved their fire. They knew it would be useless to try to make Murri understand their reasons for so doing, so they did not attempt to enlighten him, thus giving the poor fellow another incomprehensible mystery to puzzle over. After some moments longer of keen suspense the boys saw the foremost man of the party lay down his spears, *nullah-nullah*, and throwing stick, and, advancing a pace or two, he addressed them at a very rapid rate, apparently saying the same thing over and over again.

The boys, who knew but very little even of the language of the tribe near their own run, were quite unable to follow what he said; but Murri seemed to understand him.

“*Myall* say um bail go kill um white fellow

Myall say um plenty big *corroborree*" (night dance and singing), "along o' Parwango gully. Um say yo go."

"What's that? A big *corroborree* at Parwango, and will we go with them to it? Shall we, Alec?"

"No, no, let us stay here, collect the gold, and get home as quickly as possible. We have run enough risks already. Lie down, Como!"

Alec told Murri to go to the entrance of the humpie and tell the men that they could not go with them; and he did so, calmly enough now that he saw the *myalls* were friendly. But the black men did not seem inclined to take a refusal; they spoke angrily when they understood Murri's message, and their speaker returned to the rest of the party and snatched up his weapons from the ground. Just then more savages came upon the scene, and matters presenting rather a dangerous appearance, the boys began to think whether it would not be safer for them to agree to their demand and go with them than to enrage them further with a refusal.

Alec asked Murri if he knew how far the Parwango gully was from there, and was told—

"Um Parwango bail long way. Plenty much near Whanga. Along o' there," added he, pointing his lank, black arm to the north-west. "Mine *pitnce*" (I think) "um black fellow go *bora*."

"Oh, let's go, Alec, if they are going to hold a *bora*. No Englishman has ever been present at one."

"That is to say, has ever come away from one."

"Well, we may just as well chance it as stay here and be prodded to death with those nasty spears, and battered to a jelly afterwards. They are getting angry, but they mean well as yet, so here goes."

Without another word, and disregarding Alec's call, Geordie laid down his gun and stepped out into the sunshine, followed closely by his great dog. He quietly walked up to the *myalls*, who received him in the friendliest way ; indeed in too friendly a style, for they wished to examine him and all that he had on in the most curious manner. Murri, who had followed close upon George's heels, was plied with a multiplicity of questions which he answered as well as he could.

It seemed that George had been right in his opinion of the friendliness of the *myalls*, for from the moment he joined them they showed no sign of ill-feeling or treachery. They were inquisitive and curious, but were otherwise entirely amicable. Without further argument the two boys and Murri accompanied them to the Parwango valley, which was at the distance of about two hours' journey, and there they stayed, in the little camp the Wyobrees had made for themselves, till after dark. They witnessed one or two little *corroborrees* (dances) amongst the men, and then without let or hindrance they returned to the Whanga. The *bora* (a mysterious native ceremony) and the big *corroborree* were not to take place till the following night.

When they left the Parwango valley the night was rather dark, for the moon was in its first quarter, but Murri could find the way easily enough, and they were back in their own valley after a walk of less than two hours. Everything was as they had left it, and, as by this time they were all thoroughly tired, they turned into the humpie, and, flinging themselves down on the heaps of fern and leaves that they had collected for their beds, they slept soundly till nearly sunrise.

CHAPTER XVI.

GOLD!

A MOVEMENT of Como, who always slept at his master's feet, awoke Geordie next morning, and looking up he saw by the lightness of the sky (for the leaves of the branches that formed the roof had shrivelled in the heat of the sun, and he could see between the boughs) that day was at hand. He gave a great yawn and half rolled over to go to sleep again, when he remembered how much they had to do that day, and determined to get up. He stretched himself, and gave himself a vigorous shake and sat up. Alec still slept.

"Now then, wake up, you lazy beggar!" called out George from where he sat stretching his arms and rumpling his hair.

Alec bounded up as though he were shot. "What's the matter, what's the matter?" asked he in a startled voice.

"All sorts of things are the matter, but getting up is the one on hand just now, so turn out and come and have a dip in the stream—that'll wake you up."

The morning was cool before the sun was up, and the mists lay all about the valley. Leaving Murri in the humpie still asleep, or pretending to be so, the boys came out as they were, and, with Como barking a glad morning bark and leaping by the side of them, they ran to the stream. The water was cold, and the

boys came out of it rosy and steaming, and feeling fresh and strong. It did not take them long to get into their clothes, and soon they were walking back to the humpie, where they combed their crisp wet hair and made Murri get up and make a fire.

They were in capital spirits, and whilst the "billies" were boiling for their tea they walked together to have a look at their gold. There it all lay, just as they had left it. Nuggets and lumps of pure gold, yellow and heavy and chill; great pieces of rich quartz, with bits of gold stuck all over it, and gold mixed with the sand that covered the bottom of the rocky basin. The boys leaped down from the rocks into the dried-up pool, and began picking up the heavy pieces of the precious metal, for the mere pleasure of handling it. Geordie laughed aloud.

"Isn't it wonderful? Look at this piece and that one, why it is pure solid gold! Alec, how much do we owe that old beast of a Crosby?"

"He lent us £4,000, and there's another £600 or £700 interest, I suppose, by this time. Just think of the old usurer extorting 15 per cent., and from a friend, too."

"Well, do you think there is £5,000 worth of gold here?"

"Yes, and more—much more; twice or three times that much, but we can't take it all."

"Nor want it. To get five or six thousand pounds worth is all that I pray for. Funny to think, isn't it, that those yellow stones there mean so much to us? Wandaroo, and freedom from debt; and a mile or so of fencing; and a new strain of sheep perhaps! It makes me laugh to think of it."

And laugh he did, a jolly, happy peal, that rang

through the clear morning air and echoed from the rocks.

"When you have finished that morning exercise of yours, my young hyena, we'll go and get some breakfast," said Alec, whose own face was radiant with pleasure, taking his brother's arm. "We will get as much gold as we can carry, catch the horses, pack up, and be off for home this morning, before any of those worthy, but probably changeable, Wyobrees take it into their heads to visit us."

It did not take the boys very long to eat their breakfast, they were too excited to linger over it, and leaving Murri still solemnly munching away—he had not nearly done—they went back to the pool. They at once began to collect the pieces of gold, and to pile them into little heaps. Some of these lumps still had bits of quartz attached to them, and these the boys rejected, only taking those nuggets which were free from them. It was evident from the rounded and worn condition of the nuggets that they had been subjected to years, perhaps centuries, of grinding and rubbing amongst the stones at the bottom of the pool, into which they had been brought by the torrents, in flood time, from the gold-bearing rocks of the mountain. The strange shape of the rock basin, which the cascade had slowly formed, had prevented the stream from carrying them still farther down the valley.

"Why, Geordie!" suddenly exclaimed Alec, as he added a nugget weighing five or six ounces to his rapidly increasing pile. "What a fool I am. I clean forgot all about carrying the gold back with us. What have we got to pack it in?"

"Canvas bags, which your thoughtful little brother George brought on purpose!" said Geordie, with a grin.

"Well, you *are* a young Solomon! You think of everything," said Alec, a moment or so later, when his brother came back from his humpie with the shot bags.

"They'll each hold fourteen pounds weight of gold, not troy weight pounds, but honest sixteen ounce pounds, the sort that I like, so that we can tell somewhere about the value of our booty. What is gold worth an ounce?"

"Don't know exactly; something about four pounds."

"Then each of these bags," said Geordie, after two or three minutes of calculation—he was not very quick at figures—"will be worth between seven and eight hundred pounds when it is full!" And he slapped his thigh and capered about on the top of the flat stone on which he was perched.

Putting the value of the gold into figures in this manner seemed to make its worth much more definite to the boys; it was hard to realise, without the aid of numbers, of how great value were those rather ugly-looking, heavy lumps of metal.

"It makes one feel rich merely to handle it, doesn't it?" said Alec, as he threw a smooth little nugget of gold into the open mouth of the bag he was filling.

"I should think it did just," answered Geordie, with an excited laugh; "and listen to this," he added, as he took up his bag and bumped it on the rock to make the pieces lie close together. "Doesn't that noise suggest wealth? No paltry clinking, but a good rich solid *thud*, like a piece of cold plum pudding."

"Yes, delicious! And only think that all of this is going to swell old Crosby's coffers." Alec spoke regretfully, and with a sound of avarice in his voice

that was not at all natural to it. There is something terrible about great quantities of gold that seems to instil a spirit of miserliness into most men, however generous, or even prodigal, they may be. Geordie noticed this novel tone in Alec's voice, and said—

“But I don't think anything of the sort; I don't consider old Crosby's or anybody else's coffers; all I think of, and so do you, is that we shall be out of debt, and able to call Wandaroo our own again. If I thought the gold was going to change you, and turn you into a money-grub and a screw, I'd slit every bag open, and let the beastly stuff roll out in the scrub as we rode along. So pull yourself together and don't talk like that.” Geordie got rather red in the face over this long speech, which he delivered with great energy, for although these two fellows always spoke out to each other, without fear of misunderstanding, what they thought, neither of them liked to sermonize.

Alec only said, “Right you are, younker; it is beastly stuff in some ways, and I won't think of it in that manner any more. What 'a beggar you are to spot what I am thinking of. How many bags does that make?”

“I am just filling number nine. I should almost think that——”

But what it was that George Law almost thought at that interesting moment was never known, for as he was speaking they heard a loud shout at the camp, just round the bend of the gully. Como, who was lying basking in the early sunshine, raced off to see what it was, and the boys, leaving their filled bags on the rocky wall of the pool, scrambled up the stones and leaped down to the bed of the stream. Just as

they started to run to the humpie, Murri, with a face of a dirty slate colour from fright, came tearing round the cliff.

“Run, run!” he shouted; “um Wyobree fellows here one more time; plenty much *myall*, um kill us all. Climb up along o’ that place,” he said, pointing to the cliff over which the waterfall poured; and only waiting for him to come up to them the boys scrambled like cats up the crag, and hid themselves in the thick brushwood at the top. Como had not come back, but they could trust to his good sense to keep out of harm’s way.

No sooner had they reached this place of vantage than six Wyobree men, in full paint and finery, and fully armed, came rushing round the bend of the ravine. They had seen Murri run thither, and without waiting to search the humpie, had followed in hot pursuit.

It was evident that their friendly feelings of the night before were completely changed. The desire to possess the white men’s goods had been too strong for them to resist.

From where they lay crouching the boys could see the *maylls* stop, evidently puzzled at the surprising way their quarry had so entirely vanished, but it was only for a moment; one of them very soon found some of their old traces, and followed their tracks along the now dry bed of the drained stream till they came to the emptied pool. The astonishment of the Wyobree men at the change that had taken place there was beyond measure; they looked about them in bewilderment and talked rapidly together.

Whilst they were standing consulting with each other, Murri whispered that he recognised one of the

men as the fellow who had acted as spokesman for the tribe the night before.

"Then you may be sure that they are here for no good," said George to his brother.

"No ; so get your revolver ready."

"But I haven't got it with me ; I didn't put it on this morning."

"And neither have I mine ! There it is, see, on the rocks below. I took it out of my belt when I was filling the bags, and forgot to pick it up when Murri shouted out."

"Then we are done for if they see us. We must trust to their not finding us."

But that hope was blighted even as he spoke, for in drawing back a little from the edge of the cliff George loosened a tiny pebble, which rolled over and fell on to the rocks beneath.

Alec's agonised "*Hush, hush !*" was all in vain. The tiny sound had struck the acute ears of the savages, and instantly betrayed the boys' hiding-place. One of the men had fitted a spear to his throwing stick, and before a second was passed a quivering dart whirled through the bushes just above their heads. The Wyobrees lost no time ; without waiting a moment they began to climb up the cliff from the dry basin. They did not stop to choose the easiest place of ascent, but boldly began to scale up the very place over which the great waterfall used to pour.

The rock is very steep there, but they seem to find no difficulty in climbing it. In another moment they will have reached the edge of the cliff. They have left their spears down below, but their *boomerangs* are in their belts of kangaroo sinew, and they hold their *waddies* in their great strong jaws.

The boys are absolutely unarmed. Their fate seems sealed. They had risen to their feet when they saw that their hiding-place was detected, and now, white to the lips from the very anguish of excitement that they suffer, but quite calm, they look in each other's eyes steadily and prepare to meet their death. The *myalls* have almost reached the top of the crag; the foremost man will be able to place his hands on the edge in another moment. Suddenly, with a voice like a trumpet, Alec yells out—

“Follow me! Run for your life; *we'll do the beggars yet!*”

As he spoke—his face was pale no longer, and his eyes were blazing—he darted off, closely followed by George, to the old course of the stream. They wildly tore through the tangled scrub, heedless of the wounds their arms and faces received, and leaped madly across the new channel of the rapid stream.

“Make haste!” shrieked Alec, his voice shrill with excitement.

“What to do?” gasped George.

Without pausing Alec plunged waist deep into the water that their embankment retained, and shouted—

“*Burst the dam!*”

Alec followed, and the two together began to push and beat and tear at the stones they had so carefully built up a day or two before.

But had they built too firmly? would the heavy rocks never give way? Already the first man is breast high above the edge of the cliff; others are close behind him. If once they get on to their feet the boys know they are dead men. The two lads work like maniacs; they know that death is but a yard or two away. Their hands are bleeding on the jagged edges

of the stones ; they do not feel it ; their muscles are strained till their limbs are like iron, and the veins stand out like cords in their necks and on their temples, and they know nothing of it.

Push harder, lads ; tear down the stones ; do not die at the hands of these butcher blacks !

It is useless ; the dam stands firm.

“Once more, Geordie. Together now. Shove with your whole soul.” Alec’s voice was hoarse, and he spoke through his wildly clenched teeth

One more fierce struggle they made, as though their very hearts would burst. The great stones tremble ; the whole dam sways. It gives, it gives ! They feel the stones totter, and clasping each other grimly round the waist, as the mighty swirl of the escaping water almost tears them from their feet, the boys stagger to the edge of the channel.

The dam has given way ; the pent-up waters pour along all white and foaming, and the stream, re-diverted into its old channel, adds all the force of its great current to the escaping flood. With a loud roar the waters rush forward, sweeping the rocks and stones of the dam along in their resistless strength, and with a noise as of thunder, above which the despairing shrieks of the *myalls* rise for one brief second, the hapless wretches are torn from their feeble hold of the rock and, swept into the awful rush and crash of the cascade, are flung with the rolling stones of the broken dam, and battered into silence and death upon the frightful rocks below.

CHAPTER XVII.

LEAVING THE VALLEY.

FOR an instant the two lads lay where they had stumbled together on the bank, but the next they sprang to their feet and rushed to the edge of the cliff, and kneeling down looked over. For a few seconds the roar of the great volume of escaping water and the heavy rolling of the rocks and stones borne along in its current boomed in their ears, but this soon ceased, and only the usual noise of the falling cascade could be heard. The pool could not be re-filled, as the opening on the far side of it had not been closed up again, and through this gap the stream flowed out into its old, worn channel.

Four of the *myalls* lay dead and mangled among the stones beneath the fall, and the body of one lay jammed across the opening in the rocks, through which the water flowed, with his long black hair streaming in the current like a dusky weed. One man only remained alive, and he was bruised and cut and bleeding. He was dragging himself slowly and with difficulty out of the rushing stream, and was evidently so badly hurt that he could hardly stand.

"Oh, Alec, isn't it awful?" said Geordie, with a shudder, as he looked down. "And to think that we have killed those five men."

"It was in self-defence; they would have murdered us without hesitation."

"Yes, I know. But I wish I were at home; I have had enough of death."

"Let us go down and see what we can do for the one fellow that is left."

So saying, the boys descended from the cliff. Both of them were greatly affected at the work they had had to do in self-defence; they were not hardened to the sight of death, and to have thus swept five strong men from life into the black and unknown sea of death was very terrible to them. George, who was more emotional than his brother, was very pale; the intense excitement and enormous physical strain that he had undergone in the last few moments had quite unnerved him. He could hardly walk, but he made a determined effort and pulled himself together. Perhaps what did more to restore him to his usual state, than his own determination to be himself, was the sight that he and Alec saw as soon as they reached the foot of the cliff.

The one half-stunned *myall* that was still alive had managed to get out of the stream, and was hurrying, as fast as his wounded condition would let him, towards the valley, and close behind him was Murri in full pursuit with *waddy* in hand. They could see at a glance that Murri meant killing this man. They both of them shouted at the top of their voices to stop him, and, rather to their surprise, he stood still. He probably thought that Alec and George wished to kill the man themselves, for as Alec came up to him he handed him his *waddy*, and said—

"Along um side o' head, bail um top, yo hit him."

All that Alec vouchsafed in reply was—

"Get out of the way, you brute; I am not going to kill the man."

It was very evident that the *myall* thought very much the same way as Murri, for as Alec and George

caught him up, just round the bend of the gully, he turned on them savagely like a wounded animal at bay, meaning to sell his life as dearly as possible. The ground was covered with sand and loose shingle just there, for after storms the swollen stream swept over it. The Wyobree was a plucky fellow, for although badly hurt and weakened by loss of blood, by great drops of which, indeed, he could be traced all the way from the waterfall, he showed a bold front, and manfully offered fight. The boys could not help admiring his savage valour as, thus weakened, he stood up to his two foes.

The lads could see that they would be unable to make him believe they meant him no harm, so, not giving him time to strike a blow, they sprang on to him from both sides at once and easily overpowered him. He struggled and kicked and fought as long as he could, but the boys held him down without difficulty until Murri came up, whom they made tell the *myall* that they would not hurt him.

"What must we do with the creature now that we've got him? I can't see why you didn't let him quietly sneak off," said George.

"If we had not caught him he would have been home in no time, and we should have had the whole tribe on to us before we knew where we were."

"But we don't want to take home prisoners of war as well as plunder," said Geordie, with a nod of his head towards the end of the gully where the gold was.

"I know we don't, but we will keep this gentleman—pretty fellow, isn't he?—till we have caught the horses and are quite ready to start, and then we can let him go."

"In the meantime we'll take him to the humpie

and bandage the poor beggar's head up. That cut would have knocked most men over, but these black fellows do stand pain wonderfully. Come along, old ugly," said Geordie, putting his hand under the man's arm and helping him to rise.

Between them, and followed by the wondering Murri, they led the *myall* to the humpie, and George, who felt all right again directly that there was anything for him to do, managed to tie up the gash on the side of the man's head, from which a great stream of blood was pouring. He was not particularly clever at that sort of work, and the bandage was doubtless a clumsy one, but it stopped the bleeding, and that was the main point.

The utter ingratitude and treachery of these Australian *myalls* were shown very brutally by this fellow whilst George was doing what he could for him. Having dropped one of the strips of the flannel shirt he had torn up for bandaging, Geordie stooped to the ground to pick it up, and the *myall* instantly aimed a deadly blow at the back of his head with a short, heavy *mullah*, which the boys had not removed from his girdle, and which he snatched from his thigh. But Alec, who was standing by his left hand side, saw the movement of his hand, and before the blow could descend he had struck the man to the earth with one blow of his fist.

"You infernally ungrateful brute!" he shouted, livid with passion at the dastardly fellow.

"Good gracious, Alec, whatever's the matter?"

"Why, this black demon tried to beat your brains out the instant you stooped down. I believe Murri is right after all. I've a good mind to put a bullet through his wicked head."

"Oh, no, you haven't. Loose him, Murri," for that worthy fellow had pounced on him and was nearly throttling him with his hands. "You know what they are well enough; they are born and bred and live in treachery and cunning. They are like dingoes or snakes in that respect."

"Yes, and deserve equally to be shot with those beasts."

"But they are men, remember."

"Well, I wouldn't lay another finger on him if I were you. Let the brute bleed."

"Very well," said George, composedly, sitting down, for he knew perfectly well that he only had to wait a minute for Alec to cool for him to think very differently.

After a moment or two had passed without a word from either, during which the *myall* sat sullenly and silently with the blood flowing from his wound, Alec said, in rather an ashamed voice—

"I say, Geordie, we can't let that beggar bleed to death."

George sprang up with a glad face.

"I knew you thought so. I only said 'very well' because I was sure of it, and because I can't bear to act as though I thought I were a better fellow than you, old man. Come on, give us the bandage."

George very soon had completed his surgical work, and the wounded man sat without offering to move hand or foot, having failed in his one attempt at vengeance.

"Give him a billy of water to drink, and then tie his feet together with this strap and his hands behind his back, so that he can't get away whilst we are catching the horses."

Murri carried out Alec's instructions, tying the knots with much vindictiveness, grumbling to himself all the time that it would be better to kill the fellow at once and save all this bother. The antipathy that all partly civilised Australian natives feel for those that are still quite wild and savage is one of the strangest results of their progress, and it was this feeling on Murri's part that prompted him to urge the killing of the *myall* upon the boys.

Leaving the wounded man safely bound in the humpie and in the care of Como, who had returned from the hiding-place to which he had flown at the approach of the *myalls*, the boys and Murri went down the valley in search of the horses. It took them some little time to find them, for, although they all were hobbled, they had managed to ramble to a good distance, and having been without work for the last week or ten days, and having had plenty of good feed all the time, they were all rather wild and difficult to overtake. It would have taken them a much longer time had not Alec caught a glimpse of Amber, and calling to him by name the docile animal recognised his voice, and came shambling up to him as quickly as his shackled feet would let him move.

Alec took the hobble from the horse's feet, having first put on his bridle, which he had brought with him for the purpose, and lightly sprang on to Amber's back.

"Hurrah! I feel I am myself again now that I have a horse between my legs. I've never been so long without mounting a horse since I first learned to ride."

"Don't sit grinning there, then, but just head the other horses round towards the end of the gully and let me have one too."

Alec Law could ride a horse bare-backed almost as comfortably as he could a saddled one, and he cantered off after the other horses, sitting erect and graceful as easily and naturally as though his feet were in stirrups. Geordie looked after him admiringly as he rode along in the sunshine ; he might fairly have compared him with those Greek horsemen who live for ever in the marble of the Parthenon frieze had he ever seen or known anything of those most beautiful and gracious of riders, but, unfortunately, he was quite ignorant of them and of Greek art, too, so the opportunity for a beautiful simile was lost.

As the three other horses were all hobbled, Alec easily overtook and turned them, and a short time after Amber had given himself up to his proud servitude they were all bridled and led to the humpie. There the boys tied them up whilst they completed their preparations.

There was little to be done in the way of packing, for their luggage was of the scantiest description, and nearly all the carefully hoarded provisions were exhausted. Still, there were the nine shot bags of gold to be tied up somehow and secured to the saddles of the horses, for although the pack saddle was almost empty they could not load the one horse with all the great weight of gold.

" I'm blessed if I know what to tie up the mouths of these bags with. Here is every one of them gaping and showing his golden teeth, and we can't carry them like that," said Geordie.

" Oh, here's the infant Solomon at fault at last !" said Alec, addressing an imagined audience. " I am glad that there is some one thing you have forgotten, most sapient brother ; I don't feel quite so small as I

should have done had you remembered everything we wanted, down to bits of string. Nay, be not thus cast down," he went on, theatrically, for his spirits had risen to a high pitch again now that things were successful once more. "What a pity that the lovely Murri doesn't wear stays, we might have used the laces."

"The infant Solomon, as you cheekily call him, is himself again," said Geordie, with a sudden laugh, as Alec's words suggested an idea to his quick wit, "and thus he reasserts his supremacy over Alexander, the dullest of his subjects." And then, as Alec did not understand him, he explained, "The *myall's* kangaroo sinew girdle, you old muff."

Returning to the humpie for the purpose, they took the unfortunate captive's girdle from him without the least hesitation and returned to the fall. They had taken the dead bodies of the men from the water and laid them in the shadow of the cliff, and all of them still had their belts on, but a strange feeling, they did not quite know of what, prevented the lads from robbing the dead.

The tough sinew which they obtained by untwisting the *myall's* belt answered their purpose admirably, and with it they succeeded in securely tying and sewing up the mouths of the bags. They loaded the pack-horse with six of these precious little sacks, and secured one on to each of the other horses. The rest of their packing, when this most important part was finished, only took them a few minutes, and, taking a last look round to see that they had left nothing behind them, and as a sort of farewell to the place where so much had happened to them, they mounted their horses. Before they left the humpie for the last time, they untied the *myall*, who had never once moved from the position

in which they had placed him, and told him he might go. Looking half ashamed of himself, as young folk do if detected in a kindness, Alec gave the black fellow a strong knife that he always carried with him, and said apologetically to Geordie as he did so—

“I know it is silly of me, but you know I was such a brute to the fellow just now.”

George had pretended not to see what his brother was doing, but when he spoke to him he said,

“Don’t make excuses, old fellow. Give him what you like. We’re taking thousands of pounds worth of gold away with us, and I can’t help feeling a bit that it is their property somehow.”

The *myall* said nothing as he took the knife, and hardly deigned to look at it; but the last thing the boys saw of him, as they rounded a bend in the valley, was that he was carefully examining his new possession.

The sun was high in the heavens, for it was some time past noon, as, laden with the gold they had come to seek, and in the gaining of which they had endured so much, they left the Whanga valley. Ten days before this they had ridden into the valley worse than penniless, because so much in debt; and now they were leaving it with gold enough to pay off all they owed and to put the run in thoroughly good order.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THERE'S MANY A SLIP."

THE journey, which, owing to the many accidents and dangers that had happened to them, had occupied the boys ten days in the going, was accomplished in little more than half that time on the return. They met with none of the difficulties that they had had to encounter on their way to the Whanga, the fates at last seeming propitious. The large tract of country that had been burnt by the great fire in which they had so nearly perished was green again with the young grass that had sprouted everywhere after the rain; and travelling across it was rendered much easier in many places from the fact that the stretches of dense scrub, which had so hindered them when they had crossed the country before, were all totally consumed, leaving the country open.

The heavy rains that had fallen since the fire had filled the creeks again, so that they lost no time in the search for water, in which they had wasted so many hours on the outward journey.

The only causes of delay were the stoppages necessary for the providing of provisions (for all the stores they had brought with them were now completely at an end), and these were not of frequent occurrence, as Murri generally succeeded in accomplishing his hunt either before starting in the morning or during the mid-day halt. There was no scarcity of birds, and the boys several times

provided a meal by their guns, although they were chary of firing more than was necessary for fear of attracting the notice of any wandering *myalls*.

The party had seen nothing of their old antagonists when they passed through the gully where they had been attacked by Prince Tom and his friends, and Murri said that in all likelihood the whole tribe had wandered by that time to a very great distance from there. In all the time since they had left the Whanga they had hardly seen a native. Once they had come upon a woman and a child, who showed them where there was a native well close by, and another time they had seen the smoke of native fires at some little distance, but with these exceptions they had seen nothing of the *myalls*.

For the last few days the boys had talked incessantly of Wandaroo ; what would happen when they were back again ; who would be the person to see them first ; and of all the little things that make a home-coming so delightful to look forward to, and so happy in the fulfilment. Both Alec and George were in wild spirits ; the thought of their success and what it meant to all of them ; the delight and relief of their mother ; and the astonishment of the incredulous old Scotsman, Macleod, which they foresaw and spoke of, were sufficient cause for their happiness, and accounted for their excitement. Murri did not seem to enter into their feelings ; he was in no hurry to return, he was well enough off and happy where he was ; and he did not feel the calls of family affection so strongly as the white man, though it must not be thought that he was entirely without them.

The evening of the sixth day since they had left the Whanga with their precious burdens had arrived,

and the little party had reached the long creek which they believed formed the north-eastern boundary of their great run. There was still an hour or so of daylight before them, but they knew they could not reach the head station before dark, as their horses, although in fairly good condition considering the heavy work they had done in the last week, were not very fresh. But the fact that night would have fallen before they could get in did not trouble them in any way ; they knew their road about the run as well by night as by day, and if they did not know it the horses did, which was much the same thing. Besides, there was a moon only a few days from full, which, an hour after sunset, would make the night almost as bright as day.

Alec and George were riding a little way ahead, and Murri, whose turn it was to lead the pack-horses, was a few yards in the rear. They were scrambling down the rather rotten side of the creek talking and laughing gaily, for in their present state of excitement and high spirits a very little in the way of a joke was enough to make them laugh. At that moment they were both perfectly happy ; success had crowned their endeavours, and after many toils and trials and dangers they were safely close at home once more.

“ Here we are on our own land again at last ; and we can call it our own now with truth. I say, Alec, doesn't the run look beautiful ? I didn't half appreciate it before. What an age it seems since we went away.”

“ We shall be home in a couple of hours, I should think. I feel as though we ought to have a band to meet us playing, ‘ See the Conquering Hero comes,’ for we have done even more than we hoped to do

when we set out. I wonder what they'll say when we tell them."

"Oh, mother won't say anything; she'll just sit down; and be quite overcome for a minute, and then will get up, looking very happy, saying, 'Boys, you must be hungry.' Margaret will go rather red from excitement, and will run round and hug us both, forgetting that she ought to be sedate."

"What will Yesslett do?"

"That is more than mortal man can tell, for he will be leaping and yelling about the place like a madman when we tell him, and there is no knowing what he'll do in that condition. Macleod won't believe us a bit when we say we have six or seven thousand pounds worth of pure gold. Cautious, unbelieving old Scottie."

"No, but he will when we bang the gold plump down on the table before him."

They had all crossed the creek by this time, and had climbed the steep bank on the other side of it. There was rather a thick clump of trees through which they would have to pass, and they entered it still talking and laughing. The setting sun threw long shadows of the trees towards them.

"Yes," continued George, "the sound and sight of that will astonish him above a bit. What a load it is off one's mind to have got all that money safely home at last."

"There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," sang Alec, throwing his head back slightly in that little way of his.

"Don't be so ridiculous. Our work is at an end, we have got the gold home. There can't be a slip this time, because the cup is already *at* the lip."

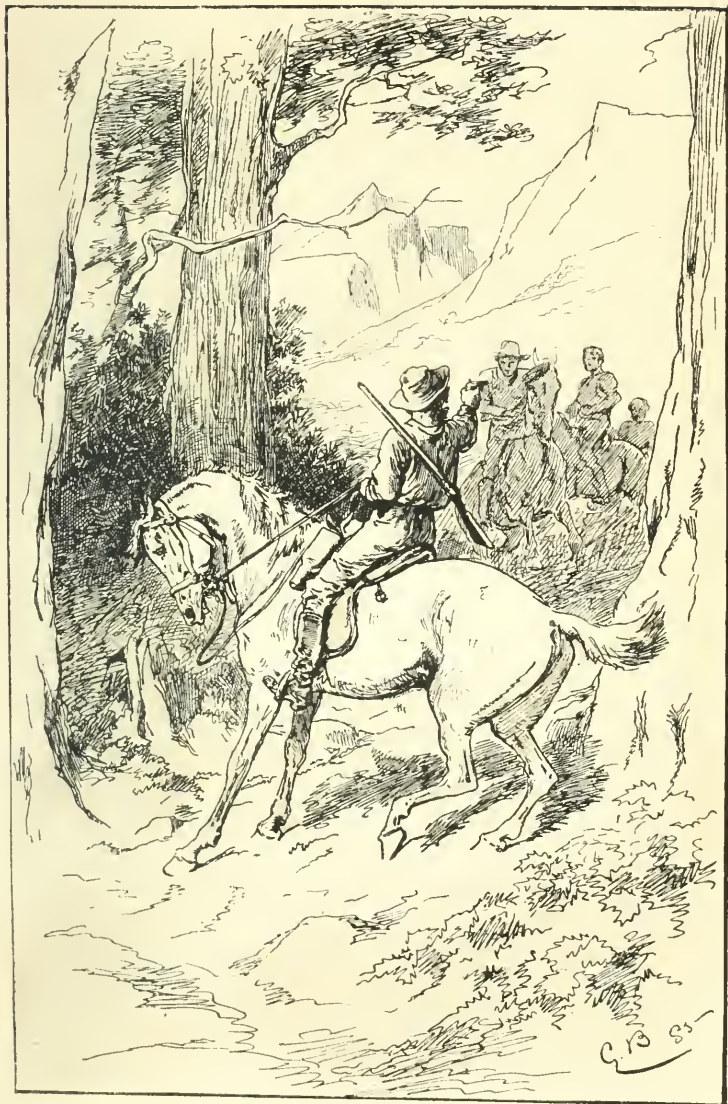
Poor lad, his words were doomed to be proved false, for, as he uttered the very words, an armed horseman leaped out from the shelter of the trees by the side of them and shouted—

“Bail up!”

This is the Australian equivalent to the English highwayman’s “stand and deliver.” It has been adopted by bushrangers all over the colonies, and by it they mean to say that unless the threatened person stops and instantly throws up his arms above his head, to prevent his getting at his pistol, they will fire upon him. But this time the man had waited a little too long before shouting; the boys were close upon him, and Alec, who seemed to grasp the situation the moment the man sprang out from the trees, had clapped spurs to his horse and rushed at him. Amber was not accustomed to the use of the spur, and leaped like a stag when he felt it.

Before the ruffian had time to take a steady aim, Alec was down on him like a whirlwind, and charging full at him the shock of the contact with Amber’s weight and great strength fairly knocked the bushranger out of the saddle. The man, a heavy-browed, black-bearded fellow, gave a great shout as he fell, evidently to call his comrades, for an answering call was heard from the bank of the gully, in the direction of the Yarrun station. Alec knew that their only chance of escape lay in instant flight, so that he did not stop to touch the man, who lay like a sack on the ground, but turning in his saddle as he passed on, he fired a shot at the horse which quite disabled it. As George caught him up, Alec said—

“We are in for it now. That fellow is Jim Kearney, I feel sure, the forger and murderer. I’ve



"AN ARMED HORSEMAN SHOUTED 'BAIL UP!'" (p. 170.)

seen his portrait at the police station at Bateman. We must ride like mad to escape them."

"Why, Kearney is Starlight's right-hand man."

"Yes, and it is Starlight and his band who are looking out for us."

"We ought to have Margaret here."

"How can you joke, Geordie, when in a minute we may have eight or ten of the most bloodthirsty villains in Australia after us."

"Can't help it, I am really as serious as you are, Heaven knows."

They were all close together now, for Murri had overtaken them, and were galloping along at a break-neck rate. As George spoke they could hear behind them shouts, and the sound of many horses galloping at full speed. The bushrangers had heard the cry Kearney had given as he fell, and the sound of the shot Alec had fired at his horse. The pursuit had begun. Above the noise their horses made as they tore over the ground the boys could hear the faint shouts of the men in pursuit.

"Now then, bail up." "If you don't stop we'll shoot every one of you." "You can't get away." And such like cheering sentences, all uttered in the angriest and savagest of tones, and interlarded with oaths and curses. The men were still some way behind them, but the evening was so calm that they could overhear nearly all that was shouted at them.

"Look here, Geordie," said Alec, anxiously, after they had been riding in this way for some time, "do you think that we had better bail up? I don't believe our horses can hold out at this pace, and theirs are probably fresher."

"Bail up? Not we. Let them catch us if they

can ; we'll lead 'em a pretty dance first. Ride as lightly as you can. We know the country and they don't, and that is in our favour."

"All right, I'm game if you are. I don't think we need ask Murri ; he'd ride anywhere if you led him, Geordie."

"I wish there were a few more of us, we'd stand and meet them, but as it is we shouldn't have a show."

The chase was a long and stern one ; neither party would give in, and a rigorous silence had fallen on the boys, who, with determined faces, rode steadily on. Occasionally, without slackening speed, they would look over their shoulders to see if their pursuers were nearing them, and each time that they did so they thought that they were a little closer. The sun had set and the short twilight was fading into night, and still the lads rode resolutely on. The mad gallop at which they had all started had slackened, as the breath of the labouring horses became short, yet, without sign of giving in, they raced along, the gradually increasing sound of the horses behind them, which slowly but surely crept upon them, goading them to their utmost exertions. Wandaroo was still some miles away when, not more than a couple of pistol shots behind them, they heard a pleasant voice cry out—

"It is no use, you know. You may just as well give in now as ten minutes later. I'm Starlight, and I'll be hanged if I let you escape me. *I'm going to have that gold.* You may have heard that when I say a thing I mean it."

The pleasantness of the voice did not induce the boys to draw rein, it rather urged them all the

more to evade him, if still there might be a chance ; for it confirmed what the man said, and what they had believed before—that it was Starlight who was in pursuit. They had often heard of the silver voice of this villain, who could sing like an angel whilst he was perpetrating the most fiendish of acts. It was said that he always spoke pleasantest when angriest, and that once when he had ordered the wooden buildings of a station to be set fire to, which the owners had barricaded and defended against him, one man who escaped alive from the fire had said that his voice, as he gave the diabolical command, was that of a seraph. This man, this Starlight, as he called himself, on whose head a price was set by the Government, and who was guilty of every crime and cruelty that a man absolutely without heart or conscience could cram into a lifetime, was yet of so winning a presence and manner and of so beautiful a face and voice, that twice, when fairly trapped, he had befooled his captors into believing him to be some one else and to let him go.

“Do you hear what he says, Alec? The gold. How does he know of the gold?”

“He shall never have it. Not an ounce of it!” said Alec, in a resolute voice that was as steady as his determination.

Again Starlight shouted to them, his pure voice ringing quite clearly, through the hushed evening air.

“Don’t be fools, you boys. I know you. If you will stop I won’t hurt a hair of your heads, but I’ll shoot you, as sure as my name is Starlight, if you don’t pull up.”

“The mean hound,” said Alec, angrily ; “not hurt a hair of our heads. Why he’d cut our throats,

smiling all the time, if he had sworn on the Bible not to do so."

"Look here, Alec, they are certainly gaining on us. We are overweighted with this gold. We must get rid of it."

"That is just what I mean to do. Put on a spurt when we get into that belt of gums, that we can gain a minute or so."

Telling Murri of their intention, as they entered the narrow band of gum trees they spurred their horses, and Alec, who was leading him then, whipped up the pack-horse, and, regardless of their limbs, they dashed between the smooth trunks, and, emerging into the brilliant moonlight on the other side, tore down the little incline to the patch of marshy ground that lay at the bottom.

"To that little pool of water," said Alec, pointing across the low ground, which the recent rains had again converted to a swamp; and without decreasing their speed they turned towards it. Pulling up by the side of the little shining pool for one brief moment, Alec said—

"Fling every one of the bags of gold into it. Make haste!"

He threw his own in, with a heavy splash, as he spoke, and leaning across the pack-horse he tore the little sacks from its saddle and flung them in the water. Murri and George followed suit.

"Ride through the pool," Geordie whispered hoarsely, "or they will see it rippling, and guess what we have done."

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THE BOYS RETURNED HOME.

BUT this unfair race could not be kept up ; the horses that George and Murri rode, although going their very best, began to show signs of distress. It had been only the sheer pluck and spirit of the well-bred horses that had enabled them to hold their own for so long, and now the superior condition of the bush-rangers' untired horses was beginning to tell. Looking back the boys could see that Starlight was rapidly overhauling them, and that at this rate they must be overtaken before another mile was past. Some of the worst mounted men of the gang had tailed off from the main body, but were following up in a straggling line. Amber, whom Alec held tightly in hand, was going as strongly as ever ; there was no signs of weakness as yet in his great stride, his ears were laid back, for he could hear the heavy thud of the galloping horses behind him, and the blood of his racing sires stirred in his veins and made him eager to outstrip them.

"I wish, I do wish, you'd push on, Alec. Amber has got it all in him. You could be home in five minutes."

"And leave you at Starlight's tender mercies, I suppose ?"

"Not a bit more than I now am. It is our only chance. You may find some of the men about, and Vaulty," said he, laying his hand on the sweating neck

of the roan he rode, "may possibly keep up till you can meet us."

"You know very well he's almost done up. How Murri has managed to keep that beast of his on his legs I can't think."

What Alec said was true; it was only too evident that Vaulty, sturdy nag though he was, had knocked up at last, and was quite on his last legs. It was heartrending work to be so near to succour and yet to be so entirely beyond its reach. Not a mile away was the head station, with all hands in for the night, and all ignorant how urgently their help was needed at only a few minutes' distance from the house. The agony that the two lads suffered was only intensified by their nearness to the refuge, which they both felt they could not possibly reach, for Alec could see by the way Vaulty stumbled that he could not hold out more than a minute longer; and George knew in his heart, even when he asked him to do it, that his brother would not leave him.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of the horses behind them; they could hear the muttered imprecations of the men, and once they heard Starlight give a lovable laugh as he said, "We shall overtake them by that black stump." Both the boys heard him, but they said nothing, though they looked at one another with a steady, loving glance, which seemed to say, "Well, whatever chance may befall us we have been staunch and true, and we'll die as we have lived—together." They must have been almost within pistol shot of the gang of bushrangers, when, through the thinly growing trees of the great paddock which lay between them and the house, they caught sight of the ruddy light of home. The wood fire and the

lamp in the kitchen shone from the open door, and gleaming through the night seemed a bitter mockery of welcome to the two lads.

"Heaven help us, Alec!" said Geordie, and there was a sob in the poor boy's throat as he spoke; "this is very hard."

It almost seemed an answer to his prayer when, from the shadow of a stately gum, not a hundred yards away, a horseman rode out into the brilliant moonlight.

"Help, help!" the two boys called at the top of their voices, and eagerly strained their ears to catch the man's answering shout.

Oh! bitter disappointment; oh! agony of futile rage that they felt when they heard the mocking voice of Keggs cry out—

"'Elp, my fine fellers; yes, but it ain't you as I'll 'elp;" and then, with the brutal triumph that men of his low and degraded type can never help displaying, he added, "Dain't I tell yer that I'd be even with yer? Why, I fun' out from them darned blacks as 'ow you'd gorne for gold; *I* fatched Starlight; *I* told 'em w'ere ter stop yer; *I* done it, I done it all. And now ain't I level with yer?"

"No, and never will be," sang out a voice behind them that they had not heard before.

When George recognised Keggs' voice and the meaning of what he said, a wave of despair for the first time swept over him; the brave heart that had stood out against so many dangers gave way at last before such black treachery. The spirit that had fronted death without a tremor, that had not quailed before perils and hardships that might without disgrace have daunted an older and sterner man, grew faint when

brought face to face with such base ingratitude and such cruel perfidy. Such deceit in one of their own men gave a shock to his trustfulness which for the moment completely staggered him. He loosed his hold on the bridle, saying, "It is useless to go on any longer."

The effect upon Alec of the discovery that it was Keggs who had brought Starlight down on them was very different. The man's words and the taunting tone of his voice made the elder lad boil with indignation, and it was with passionate anger that he realised the foulness of the man's degraded character and the meanness of his behaviour—living upon their food and their wages and yet betraying them. Snatching up his pistol, on which his hand was resting, he rushed at the jeering villain, who, to stop the boy, had drawn up his horse in the line he knew they must follow. Taking a rapid aim, Alec, with no more hesitation than he would have shown at shooting a mangy dingo, fired twice full at the man, who fell with a shriek and howl of agony, mortally wounded, with two bullets in his chest.

Without staying to notice the fate of such carrion, Alec turned to look for his brother, whom he had left, at some little distance behind, with Murri. Vaulty, George's horse, had stopped when his rider had thrown down the reins of his bridle, and stood quite still, trembling in every limb. Just as Alec turned to ride back to them he saw that Starlight and his gang were close upon them, and that George still sat his horse, although looking quite dazed and stupified. Murri was leaning across from his horse and was taking hold of George's bridle as though to urge him to continue his flight, but it was in vain, for at that moment the bushrangers were upon them.

Starlight having calculated the distance, and feeling certain that he should overtake the boys before they could reach the head station, had given orders to his men that they were not to fire. He acted in this way from no feeling of mercy, for that was a sentiment he never experienced, but from a motive of policy, as he feared the noise of fire-arms might be heard by the men at the house, and bring them down upon him. Whilst Alec was still at some little distance Starlight had brought up his horse alongside of George, and turning his handsome, lovable face to him, he asked him in that false, sweet voice of his—

“Where is all that gold you have found, my lad? You have given us a stiff chase, and as we have won it you must provide the prize.”

“We have no gold,” said George, still like one in a dream.

“Come, come, you don’t expect me to believe that,” said Starlight, laying his hand on George’s arm. The action was gentle, it looked almost like a caress, but the hand, although so soft, was iron-sinewed, and the boy felt his arm grasped as though in a vice.

Starlight’s touch seemed to act upon him as a charm; it aroused him from the state of stupor of despair in which he was plunged, and fire coming back to his eye and life to his voice, he shouted—

“Loose my arm!” and swinging himself round in the saddle in his lithe, quick way, he tore his arm from the bushranger’s grasp. Starlight made a rapid clutch at him as Geordie swerved aside, but missed his aim, and the boy, seizing his opportunity, clenched his fist and swung his stout young arm round with a backward blow, and striking the bushranger full on the side of the head almost felled him from his horse.

Several of the men, thinking that things had now gone far enough, sprang to the side of the boy, and one of them, dealing him a stunning blow with his huge fist just behind the ear, roughly seized him round the waist with one muscular arm and threw him heavily to the ground. There the lad lay quite white and senseless, with the blood pouring from his nostrils, across the gnarled roots of a burnt and blackened tree stump.

During this little *mêlée*, Murri, who was not blessed with an entirely valiant heart, noticed that the observation of the party was fixed upon the little central group of George and his opponents. Taking advantage of this very momentary chance he silently slipped from his horse, without stopping it, and darting to a place where the stumps of several burnt trees were still standing, his black body was instantly concealed in the shadows.

The next minute one of the men noticed that Murri's horse was riderless.

"Hallo!" said he, "where the blazes is that fellow gone to?"

"Didn't see him go," answered one of the other men. "It don't matter, it was only one of them blarmed nigs; he've sneaked off."

This had not occupied a moment in happening, and it was just as Geordie was flung to the ground that Alec came upon the scene. Seeing his brother struck from his horse, and noticing that the body, which lay so white and stark in the moonlight, was quite motionless, he felt sure that this time death had claimed his own. He was maddened with passion and rage, and singling out the man who had done it, a great, swarthy fellow twice his own age, he rode at

him like a fury. He was entirely without personal fear, and believing that his brother, who was his chief tie to life, was dead, he was utterly reckless of consequences to himself. He had no weapon with him but the pistol he had just fired at Keggs, but grasping this by the barrel he struck the man full in the mouth with the heavy butt of it. The passionate blow bruised and cut the bushranger's lips terribly, and shattered several of his great white teeth, and maddened with the pain of it the fellow howled a curse at Alec and drew his pistol from his belt. Alec aimed another rapid blow at him with his weapon, but his hand being wet with sweat the polished barrel of the pistol slipped from his grasp, and, as it darted from his fingers, struck the bushranger a startling blow on his bronzed cheek-bone just below the eye. The man was now absolutely beside himself with the agony of these two blows, and like a wild beast he turned to rend his enemy.

The two men, Alec and the bushranger, were now quite at close quarters, and pressing one hand to the bleeding cut on his cheek, and with an infamous oath on his lips, the man again raised his pistol to fire. But Alec had not taken his eyes from his opponent, and guiding Amber only with his knees he suddenly stooped to his saddle as the man fired, and before he was ready with his second shot had sprung upon him. He clutched his outstretched arm and bore it down with his sheer weight, and then, exerting all his strength, he grappled with the fellow, and tried to tear him from his horse.

They were not equally matched, for the man was not only much older and heavier than Alec but much stronger too ; but Alec was much the more active, and

being wiry and muscular he gave the bushranger as much as he could well do. The other men looked on without offering to interfere, for after all they were Englishmen although thieves, and a rough feeling of fair play prevented them interrupting what was so evidently a single combat.

At first things seemed to go in Alec's favour, for the bushranger, not daring to loose his bridle, could only use one hand, and it almost looked as though Alec would unseat his enemy. But this state of affairs only lasted a few seconds, for the man, feeling that Alec, who could use both hands, was getting the better of him, clapped his spurs to his horse and tried to tear himself out of the boy's grasp. But Alec did not mean to lose his man; he was utterly regardless of what befell himself, and was fully determined to be revenged on the man who had taken Geordie's life.

Feeling that the bushranger was endeavouring to separate himself from him, Alec swore in his heart that he should not effect his purpose, and as the bushranger's horse swerved to one side, Alec kicked his feet free from his stirrups, and, exerting all his sinewy strength, leaped on to the other horse. As he already had a firm hold of the bushranger he was able to do this with greater certainty, and before the astonished man knew what he was about the boy was firmly seated behind him. The horse, feeling this double load, and goaded by the startled spurring of its rider, darted madly away from the gang. The bushranger yelled for help and tried to stop his horse, but failed to do so. He struggled to free himself, but Alec had him at his mercy. Although the man was so much stronger than the boy, he was rendered com-



"ALEC KICKED HIS FEET FREE FROM HIS STIRRUPS, AND
LEAPED ON TO THE OTHER HORSE." (p. 182.)

paratively helpless from the way in which Alec held him, for his left arm was engaged in trying to stop his terrified horse, and by his sudden leap Alec had managed to get his right arm behind his back, and in this position it was next to useless.

The fury of anger that possessed Alec gave him double strength for the time, and aided by his position behind the man, he was more than his match. The tables were quite turned, and the lad at that time was the more powerful. Alec could hear the rest of the gang following them; some were laughing at Pearson's terror, and some applauded Alec's courage and address. The boy knew that, weighted as it was, the horse must be overtaken in a moment, and that if he meant to unhorse the brute in front of him he must use all his strength and lose no time in accomplishing his purpose.

Holding with a grasp of iron the bushranger's right wrist, which was behind his back, in his left hand, Alec made a clutch at his hot, hairy throat. For one moment he held him thus, digging his fingers deep into the flesh and squeezing the great muscles of the man's strong neck with all his force as he tried to choke him. But loosing his reins for one moment, Pearson tore Alec's hand away and breathed free again. It was not for long, for he had to snatch at his bridle again as the horse plunged wildly when it felt its head free, and he feared lest he should be thrown. The instant that Alec's arm was loosed he darted his hand under the bushranger's thick strong-growing beard and seized him by his throbbing throat again, and, possessed with a perfect madness of fury he swayed the strong man to and fro till he almost shook him from the saddle. Again the man

wrenched himself free, but not before the veins of his purple face were swollen almost to bursting.

Alec heard the rest of the gang now close behind him, and felt that his prey was escaping him, and that after all his vengeance would be frustrated. His heart was thumping wildly, the loud pulsations of his blood were surging in his ears, and his breath came in quick laboured sobs, but his determination was unchanged, and grimly he held on to his purpose. A life for a life ; this man must die ! Above the loud beating of his throbbing heart, above the noisy galloping of the horse he rode and the heavy steps of those of the men now so close in his rear, Alec could hear the silver tones of Starlight's beautiful voice quite clearly as he laughingly said :—

“Don't shoot at him. It'll give Pearson a lesson, he always was a clumsy brute with a horse. The boy can't hurt him, and if he does it doesn't much matter. It is capital fun, anyway. Look how the young beggar sticks on. Don't shoot, I say ; I reserve that for myself afterwards, and you might hit poor Mr. Pearson, and that would be sad.” And again he laughed his bright melodious laugh.

Still holding Pearson's writhing arm behind his back, Alec made one last effort. The man, vainly trying to pull up or turn his terrified horse, was leaning forward as far as possible to escape Alec's grasp, but hearing the voices of his companions apparently so close behind him he partly raised his head and looked back. Like an eagle darting on its prey Alec was upon him. Plunging his hand with extended fingers among the bushranger's black, curling beard, Alec grasped it with an iron grip. He could feel the heat of the man's strong jaw and

his burning neck as he writhed his head to free himself, and his hot breath fell on the boy's bare wrist. Twisting his hand more firmly in the mass of the man's beard, Alec wrenched his head backwards till he could look in his distorted face. Pearson again loosed his bridle, and, shrieking with pain and fear, wildly tore at Alec's hand, but in vain, for the lad was possessed for the time with the strength of three.

Seeing that the rest of the gang was now only a yard or two behind him, Alec suddenly loosed Pearson's arm, which he had been holding behind the man's back, and, with lightning swiftness, struck him two blows with his left hand, which was thus set at liberty, one on the temple and one on the arch of his bent brown throat. Then making a gigantic effort, using up the last of his strength for the time being, he managed to shake the man from his saddle—just as the brutal fellow had served Geordie—and flung him down among the hoofs of the horses in his wake.

Although the men tried to pull up or turn aside it was too late, and, galloping at full speed after Alec, several of the horses passed straight over Pearson as he lay stretched in front of them. Starlight, who was quite callous to the sufferings of others and regardless of the value of any life but his own, did not even try to evade the man, and his horse struck Pearson's head mortally as it passed over him.

Alec's strength was quite spent when he had thrown Pearson, and, although he instinctively kept his seat on the horse, he was easily overtaken and stopped. In a moment several of the men of the gang had sprung from their saddles and torn him

from his panting horse. Then an angry Babel of voices rose around him in eager questioning, and in vile imprecations against him for the trouble he had cost them and for the lives that he had taken.

Alec stood quite silent under their storm of anger and abuse ; he made no attempt at reply, for he was half dazed with the rapid current of events, and was so benumbed with grief at the loss of his brother, that now that his passion had spent itself he was careless of what happened to himself. He felt the hot grasp of the men's hands upon him, and, without any attempt at a struggle, he was pulled to the place where Starlight was standing.

CHAPTER XX.

A CONFERENCE OF BUSHRANGERS.

MOST of the bushrangers had dismounted to ease their jaded horses, whose heaving flanks and expanded nostrils spoke plainly enough of the great exertion they had made in the chase that was just ended. The men were standing about Starlight, who was leaning against the charred stump of a burnt tree, flicking the side of his shapely leg with the whip he carried. He looked up as the two men who had hold of Alec brought the boy before him, and with a winsome smile he turned to him and said—

“Well, young fellow, what do you think of yourself for having given us such a chase as this? Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

Alec made no reply. He thought, and rightly so, that this sort of remark required no answer. Starlight did not seem to notice the omission, but went on in the same light, bantering tone—

“Don’t look so sullen; you have done very well for a beginner. We have killed your brother—oh, you need not look surprised, I know all about you, and besides you are as like as two peas—but you have killed two of my men in return, and that ought to satisfy you. Now one of you fellows there, just look about and see if you can find a little water for the horses. I suppose it is no use asking you where we can find it, Mr. Law, though it would only be

hospitable of you on your own run to show us where there is some."

Although Starlight spoke so lightly and, seemingly, was so careless of what went on around him, he kept a keen watch over every one and everything, and the quick catch in the breath that Alec made when he spoke of Geordie did not escape his rapid glance. Like the brute that he was, he determined to torture the poor lad with references to his dead brother from a sheer love of cruelty. Whilst some two or three of the men went to search for water, giving the bridles of their horses to the others to hold, Starlight continued his cruel amusement. To see him, as he leaned so carelessly and gracefully against the burnt stump, with the moonlight falling on his young and handsome face, and lighting up the dimple that fluttered in his cheek when he smiled, one would have thought him some happy fellow talking with a friend instead of the cruel, heartless outlaw that he was.

"It was hardly a fair struggle, was it, for Pearson was so much stronger than your brother, who must have been tired too? It must be unpleasant to have one's brother killed before one's face. Do you find it so?" He looked up with a simple, inquiring glance at Alec as he spoke, and laughed to see how white the boy had grown.

Whilst he was speaking, one of the men who was holding the horses walked up to him and remonstrated with him for his brutal behaviour. He was a great, big, honest-looking fellow, with kind blue eyes and a short curly yellow beard, who looked strangely out of place in the company he was with, and whose reckless, dare-devil expression did not seem quite natural to him. Alec could not hear

what he said, but he recognised the voice as being that of the man who had shouted out an answer to Keggs when he was boasting that he was equal with the boys at last.

Starlight listened to what this young fellow had to say, and then, without turning his head, he looked at him between his half-shut lids and said in a slightly sardonic voice—

“You don’t seem to enjoy your new profession, Mr. Crosby. Don’t you think you had better go back to that pleasant old fellow, your uncle, and act the prodigal nephew? But understand this, once for all, I don’t put up with contradiction or allow interference. So let’s have no more of these sanctimonious airs; remember you are just as much a bushranger—I’m not frightened of the word—as I am, although you have not tried your hand at sticking any one up yet, or anything else, as far as I can see, but eat and drink with the best of us.”

“And never will do anything for you, Heaven willing, from to-night,” said Crosby, as he stepped a pace or two to one side.

“Oh, he’ll come round,” whispered Starlight to Wetch, the man on his left, a trusty henchman this, who had no qualms of conscience, and who had sold himself body and soul to his leader.

A moment or two after this the men who had been looking for water came back and said that they could find none, and Starlight, who owed his success to the quickness of his movements, and to the fact that he never lost time in unnecessary halts during his forays, ordered a start. Whilst Alec was standing, guarded by the two men who had hold of him, Como came bounding to his side. The dog had

rushed to Geordie when he was thrown to the ground by Pearson, but as the lad had made no responsive movement when he had licked his hands and face he had left him and sought Alec. The dog was wild with delight at finding one of his masters, and sprang up and licked Alec's white cheek and fawned upon him. One of the men kicked the dog to one side, and it howled with pain. Starlight, whose back had been turned for a moment, looked round and, seeing what it was, sang out—

“Quiet that dog ; put a bullet through his head, some one.”

But this was too much for Alec to bear passively. A passionate love for animals was one of his strongest feelings, and to hear the order given for Como's death was more than he could endure. With a sudden wrench he tore himself out of the grasp of the two men that held him, for he had been standing so quietly that their hold upon him had gradually grown slack. He knelt on the ground, and flung his arms round the dog that his brother had loved so much, and with his black brows drawn down he looked up at Starlight, and said, quite calmly—

“Don't shoot the dog.”

“Yes, I shall. I can't have that noisy brute yelping about me.”

“Then you'll shoot him through me,” said Alec, in the same determined voice.

“I'm going to shoot you, I know, but not just yet,” remarked Starlight in a casual tone.

“We want a dog up at Norton's Gap ; why not take this one ? It is a handsome brute,” said one of the men.

“That alters the case,” said Starlight, pleasantly

"I'm always open to conviction. Will he follow us?"

"Yes, he'll follow, if I tell him to," said Alec, unconsciously caressing the velvety ear of the dog, who stood quite still now that he had found his master.

"All right, let him go, I won't hurt him," said Starlight; and then, as Alec looked at him doubtfully, and still retained his hold on the dog, he added, "Oh, I'm not a liar as well as a thief."

"Stow that," growled one of the men.

Starlight laughed, and, with a wave of his hand towards his companions, he said to Alec, "Look at these fellows, they daren't call a spade a spade. They have taken to the bush for years some of them, and lived by robbing ever since, yet they have such tender feelings that they can't bear to be told so. They are not afraid of the substance, but they fear the shadow. I'm a thief and a murderer too, and I don't mind saying it. And so are all of you," said he suddenly, turning to the men, who were always silenced by his scorn. "What about the Denisons, and the Longs, and that man up at Menyp, eh, and others besides? How did they come by their deaths? So don't make fools of yourselves; you know as well as I do that what I say is the truth. I shall be shot or hanged some day, and so will every one of you. Deservedly too."

"We shall all be lagged, and scragged too, as you say, guv, if we stay here much longer," said one of the men with a laugh that was a coarse imitation of Starlight's own.

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard to-night. The horses are breathed by this time. I've only one more thing to do and then we can start."

He was drawing his pistol from his belt as he spoke. "The whole affair has been a fool's errand, and I'm heartily glad that that brute Keggs has got what he deserved for telling us such a cock-and-bull story of gold and making us waste so much time."

"What's yer goin' ter do?" asked Middance, one of the two men who had again taken hold of Alec.

"Going to give the dingoes a feast, and to send that young person you've got hold of into the pleasant company of his dear departed brother. So perhaps you had better loose him. I don't suppose I shall miss him, but, being so nervous, I might."

This was enough for Middance and the other man who held Alec; they loosed the lad and nimbly sprang aside. For one awful second Alec stood like a statue in the dread presence of Death; he felt as though his heart were grasped in an icy hand which froze his blood within his veins. He could not stir, for the frightful thought of the sudden death he was threatened with had benumbed and deadened every limb.

Starlight cocked his pistol, raised it—Alec saw the moonlight gleam upon the polished barrel—took a rapid aim at the breast of the motionless boy, and, without a tremor of hesitation, fired full at him.

The loud explosion rang across the open moonlit plain.

But the smoke rolled away and the boy still was there, standing as he had stood before; for just as Starlight fired, Crosby, who had seen what he was about to do, sprang to his side and knocked up his arm. The bushranger leaped round, his eye flashing ominously, and in a voice that was unsteady with anger, he said—

“What now—what do you mean by that?”

“Why, I mean that you are a fool to think of killing your golden goose in that way. Do you think, just because he has no gold with him, that he does not know where it is to be found. I know better than that. Keggs’ story was true enough, take my word for it. Don’t let us lose all the benefit of our work by killing the only person who can help us in getting what we want. Let me ask the lad; I’ll back he tells me.”

Crosby spoke so naturally and assumed a manner of such keen interest in the affair that the astute Starlight himself was taken in. As the young fellow walked across to where Alec was standing alone, Starlight turned to Wetch, and said—

“Didn’t I say he’d come round. He’s just as mad after the gold as any of us. He has got his head screwed on right, too. Leave him alone to manage the boy.”

Whilst Starlight was thus whispering to his lieutenant, Crosby had crossed over to Alec, and taking hold of his hand, and giving the lad a little shake to rouse him from the half stupefied condition he was in, he rapidly whispered in his ear in a low voice—

“You must say that you know where the gold is. It is your only chance. Trust to me, and I’ll help you out of this mess if it costs me my life. Look me in the face, lad,” said he, laying his two hands on Alec’s shoulders, “so that you will know me again. Say something, anything, it doesn’t matter what; only let them see that you are speaking.”

“I shall know you again well enough,” said Alec, looking deeply into the honest grey eyes before him,

for the two men were of a level height. "I have not so many friends," he added, with a dreary sigh, "that I can afford to mistake one when he offers himself."

"All right, Boss," Crosby sang out aloud as he turned again and faced Starlight; and then, leaving Alec, he walked to the place where the men were clustered together, and with a wink and a knowing little nod of the head which satisfied Starlight that he was heartily one with them, he said, "He knows where the gold lies; I shall be able to get it all out of him, for he thinks I'm a friend, so if any of you fellows spot us talking very friendly, just hold your tongues and don't let on."

This last sentence was a bold stroke of policy on Crosby's part, for he knew that if the men saw him talking with Alec they would be sure to suspect something, so he thought he would disarm suspicion by telling them some part of the truth. He was a shrewd, clear-headed fellow enough, and knew that to tell the truth in part was the best way to conceal the whole truth from them."

"Ah," said Starlight, "that comes of having an honest face, and a pair of innocent-looking eyes. Now you, Wetch, could never have made the boy believe that you were anything but a villain."

Starlight little thought that it was the pure and kindly soul that shone from Crosby's eyes which made his whole face good and honest, or that Wetch himself, ugly brute though he was, might have looked as honest as Crosby had but his spirit been as guiltless and bright. It is not noses and features and colour that mark a man's face as that of an upright, honourable fellow; but it is the steady light that shines from

the eyes and the pleasant expressive lines of the honest mouth that show the character of a man, and these things no knave or rogue can imitate, stare though he may and smirk as he will.

"Well, bring the boy along, then. Let him have Pearson's horse ; it seems he knows how to ride that beast," said Starlight, laughing as he thought of the way Alec had stuck on the horse, "and his own has bolted; more's the pity, for I should have liked that chestnut myself."

"Now, then, look sharp, you fellows," said Wetch, impatiently ; "the moon has begun to sink, and it is a blarmed dark ride to Norton's Gap."

Without further delay they all sprang to horse. One of the men brought up Pearson's horse to Alec, and at a glance from Crosby he mounted it without a word. Giving the signal to start, Starlight placed himself at Alec's off-side, and drawing his pistol from his belt and showing it him, he said—

"Look here, my young friend, if you try to make a bolt of it, I'll let daylight—or, rather, Starlight—into that headpiece of yours ; but if you don't make a fool of yourself, and come along quietly, why you'll be all right, and shall have something to eat in an hour or so into the bargain."

Without more ado the whole party set in motion, and, casting a last look to the place where poor Geordie lay all white and still in the moonlight, with a choking throat Alec turned his back upon Wandaroo, and rode off at a good round pace southwards.

CHAPTER XXI.

YESSLETT PREPARES TO ACT.

THE lamps were lighted at Wandaroo, and all the people about the station had come in for the night ; the men had finished their tea, and were sitting about the place smoking their short, black pipes, and the horses were all turned out and were cropping the young, sweet grass of the paddock. Man and brute alike were aware that work for the day was ended, and in their different ways each was enjoying his well-earned rest. The large general room of the house at the head station was quiet, for tea was cleared away, and, the kerosine lamp having been turned up, Mrs. Law and Margaret were sitting with their sewing in that busy idleness which women find so restful after a long day's work. Yesslett Dudley was in the room, quiet, too, for a wonder, for he was making one more attempt to finish a long delayed and often interrupted letter to his old home. Every now and then sounds of life could be heard from the kitchen, and the work of the ladies made slight rustlings as they moved it, but otherwise, except an occasional word from Mrs. Law and Margaret, the room was quite quiet. Yesslett went on with his writing steadily for five or ten minutes, an unprecedented period of repose for him ; the ladies could hear him dipping his pen savagely into the ink-pot, and then he would go on writing again. At last, between his impatience at the ink and his distaste to silence, he had to speak.

"I say, Margaret, this beastly ink-pot has dried itself up again. I never saw such a place for ink as Australia is. I believe the flies drink it as well as bathe in it," said he, fishing out the body of a drowned house-fly on the end of his pen.

"You must remember that it is more than a week since you last wrote, Yess, and that you didn't put the top on the ink-pot when you left off."

"Oh, how you do notice things, Maggie," said the boy, looking up with a smile. "Is it a week really since I wrote this page?"

"Yes, it is, Mr. Restless, and if you don't go on it strikes me it will be another week before you get that one done."

This speech of Margaret's was prophetic, for it was much more than a week before Yesslett ended that letter.

"Why, what is the day of the month, Maggie? I never can remember since I've been here; there is nothing to remind one."

"The 16th."

"Is it! By Jove, we shall have the boys back in a day or two. They said that they should not be gone more than a month or five weeks at most."

"I wish they would come," said Mrs. Law, letting her hands fall on to her lap; "I am beginning to get so anxious about them. Those horrid *myall* blacks in the north-east country are so cruel and savage."

"Oh, don't trouble about them, aunt," said Yess leaving his place and sitting down on the edge of the table by the side of Mrs. Law, where he instantly began what he called "arranging" her work-basket. "Both Alec and Geordie are careful fellows, and they are well armed and well mounted. And those two

black chaps, Prince Tom and What's-his-name, aren't bad fellows, and will look after them."

Ever since his cousins had gone away Yesslett had assumed the position of the man of the house. He was Macleod's right hand man in the working of the run, and had developed qualities of diligence and trustworthiness that astonished those who had only known him as the rollicking boy he had been aforetime. The two ladies grew to love him very dearly in these anxious weeks, and began to place confidence in him and rely upon him, as women will do, unconsciously perhaps, upon a man, however young a one he may be, if only he show signs of trustworthiness and steadiness. He was just the same gay, light-hearted fellow that he had been before, but under this there was a budding manliness of purpose and temper that spoke well for his future character. Chief of all his functions was that of comforter to his aunt, and right well did he fill it, for his heart was in the work. His dead father had filled the boy's mind with generous thoughts of deference and courtesy to women, and these good old-world notions of kindness and chivalry, which none appreciate more keenly than women, had gained Yesslett the name of Chevalier, with which the two ladies had dubbed him.

"Yes, the boys can take care of themselves, and I trust they are all well," said Mrs. Law, taking up her work again and resuming it with that pathetic patience which women, forced to inactivity, often show. "They may be safe, but I want my boys back again for more reasons than one." Mrs. Law was referring to the debt on the run, which had to be paid in less than two days from that time, or the mortgage

would be foreclosed by Crosby, and the run would pass out of their possession.

Knowing of what her mother was thinking, Margaret tried to divert her thoughts to the business of the present hour, so she said—

“Where has Macleod gone to-day, mother?”

“To Bateman. He left soon after breakfast. He wants to find a man in the place of that Keggs. I always disliked that man, and Macleod says that he is sure he has been out all night several times lately, riding one of the horses. He doesn’t know what it means, but it looks suspicious, and we want to get rid of him.”

“I saw him leaving the bachelor’s hut with a bridle on his arm as though he were going to catch one of the horses, an hour or so ago,” said Yesslett.

“Did you?” asked Mrs. Law. “I wonder what he is after. I wish the lads were back.”

“Surely, mother, you don’t think that Keggs’ going out with a bridle on his arm is likely to do them any harm?” said Margaret.

“No. Oh, no, certainly not. But I should like them to be here, or else I should like to be with them sharing their dangers,” said Mrs. Law, turning to Yesslett, a little flush mounting to her cheeks as she spoke. “You did not think your old aunt had so much spirit, did you, Chevalier mine?”

“I always thought you were everything that a brave lady should be,” said Yess.

“Ah, you don’t know mother yet,” said Margaret. “Did you never hear how, when father was away once, she defended Wandaroo from the *myalls*, soon after she first came here, and when the station was quite a tiny place?”

"No, I've not heard about that. You ought to have told me, aunt."

"It is so many years ago, before Margaret was born, and you know what an old lady she is getting," said Mrs. Law with a smile, "that I begin to forget all about it."

"But I don't," said Margaret. "Just you listen to this, Yess, and you will hear how brave and calm a woman can be in the very midst of danger."

Margaret had drawn her thread through her work, and was, in her excitement at the memory of the story, holding it tightly stretched out to its full limit. She looked very beautiful as she turned her brown richly-coloured face towards Yesslett, with the bright lamp-light falling on her shapely head with its regal coils of black hair, and Mrs. Law, with that unselfish pride which mothers feel in their daughters' beauty, was thinking more of her comeliness than of what she was saying. Yess, too, noticed how the girl's fine eyes glowed with her enthusiasm, and was a little surprised to find how strong and bold a spirit burned in these two women, whom he had only seen when engaged in the quiet round of their daily toils.

Perhaps he guessed then whence his own greater courage flowed. Daily in the presence of these brave-souled ladies he had grown valorous and more strong. Their intrepidity had slain the old nervousness he once had felt. No man, or boy either, could live with two such women without being raised to their high level, more especially when he felt that he was their defender and protector, and was called upon to make every effort on their behalf.

"The *myalls* were very numerous and wild about here when mother first came to Wandaroo, and once,

when father had to leave her for two days quite alone, they began collecting in large numbers about the head station. The natives had not been dispersed in those days, and they were——”

Here the girl's low voice suddenly ceased, and for a moment a startled silence fell upon the room. The two windows were thrown wide open to the night, and the cool odorous breeze just stirred the light curtains that hung before them.

What was it they had heard?

From far away, from beyond the end of the great paddock, there came the sound of a single pistol shot. It was the shot that Starlight had fired at Alec when Crosby had knocked up his arm. The noise of the two barrels that Alec had emptied at Keggs had not reached the house. The report was faint, but the night was so still that sound could travel far. They all looked up. For a moment no one spoke.

“What was that?” said Mrs. Law, in a low, intense whisper, laying her work down, and with the palm of her right hand unconsciously drawing off the thimble from her finger, as though preparing for action.

In two silent strides Yesslett reached the window, and was leaning out intently listening. Far away down the gully a morepork was calling. Nothing more. Then came a muffled laugh from the kitchen, and the sound of a chair pushed back. They had not heard it there.

Both the ladies had grown pale, but on neither face was seen the shadow of a fear.

“It was a pistol shot, I'm sure,” said Yess.

“It cannot be the boys,” said Mrs. Law; “they would know it would alarm us too much.”

"What about Keggs?" said Margaret, making one of those intuitive leaps at the truth which are so characteristically feminine. "You know that Yess said he owed them a grudge."

And now had come Yesslett's time for action. He certainly felt one pulsation of his old nervousness at his heart, but the new courage that came of his new strength and spirit instantly repressed it, and he himself was surprised to find how calm he felt. He was standing at the window where the moonshine fell into the room and mingled with the yellow lamp-light. His fair, fluffy hair, moved by the tiny breeze, shone like a halo where the light glowed in it. One hand rested on the low window-sill as he turned and said quickly, but in a quiet voice—

"They may be in danger. I feel sure it is the boys. I will go straight on across the paddock. Margaret, you run round by the bachelor's hut and tell any of the men that are there to follow me as quickly as possible to 'the Dip,' just beyond the end of the paddock; that's where the sound came from."

Without another word Yesslett leaped through the window, and dashing across the garden scrambled over the fence into the yard; crossing that at a run, he got into the paddock without losing time by going round to the bachelor's hut. As he entered the paddock he saw Margaret's white figure darting diagonally across the yard to the men's quarters. He hurried along at a break-neck speed over the dewy grass, the startled horses looking up and moving away as the boy dashed past. He had travelled half-way across the paddock without slackening speed, for his healthy out-door life in Australia had given him all the strength of limb he wanted when he was in

England, and he now was as long winded as either of his two cousins. He was just on a level with a little patch of wooded shade, called the "Gum clump" on the station, when he saw a figure, a thin, black figure, running towards the house as swiftly as he himself was from it.

It was useless for him to attempt to hide, for he had been seen ; so he stood where he was till the man came up. It was a black boy ; but Yess could not tell whether it was one from the blacks' camp or a *myall* ; he did not know Murri well enough to recognise him in the deceptive moonlight. He was not left long in doubt, for the man rushed up to him and said in the most excited voice and in so great a hurry that Yess could hardly understand him—

"Make um great haste, Missa Yessley. Come along o' me. Plenty much white fellow ride quick, cotch us. Um chewt Missa Law dead bong ; um take Alec along ob um."

All this was unintelligible to Yesslett, but it sounded very terrible, and he could see that the man was in deadly earnest ; so, without a second's delay, he said that he was ready to go with him. He knew, directly that the man began to speak, that he must be one of the two black fellows that had gone with Alec and George, but he could not tell which one.

Murri turned at once, and started again at a swift pace to run towards "the Dip," as it was called, at the end of the paddock. Yesslett managed with difficulty to keep up with him. They climbed over the fence together, and, straight as an arrow to its mark, Murri led the way to the charred tree trunk, across the roots of which George had fallen. Murri had had the sense to move the boy's body from the awkward

position in which it had fallen, and to raise his head a little.

Yesslett darted to what seemed to be the lifeless body of his cousin. Geordie's eyes were closed as though in a heavy sleep; his face was deadly white, except where the blood that had poured from his nostrils, when he was flung to the ground, had stained it with its awful stain. At first Yesslett could detect no signs of life in the motionless body before him, but slipping his hand beneath Geordie's open shirt, and placing his hand above his heart, he thought he could detect a faint, faint fluttering there. Yes; hurrah! there was a tiny movement, and bending his cheek down to Geordie's pale lips he could just feel the lightest breathing on it.

"You get um water?" he said, with excitement ringing in every tone of his voice, as he turned to Murri.

"Bail water bong along o' this place," said Murri; shaking his head. "All um water up at station." Then, as a sudden idea seemed to strike him, he sprang up and said, "Mine go cotch um *yarroman*. Plenty much water in um bockle."

When Alec had ridden up alongside of Pearson, and leaped from his horse on to the bushranger's, Amber had turned, and getting out of the *mêlée* had joined the horse from which Murri had so quietly slipped at the beginning of difficulties. The bushrangers had not stayed to catch them, but had swept on to overtake Alec and Pearson, and the two Wandaroo horses had stopped not very far from where Geordie lay, and were quietly grazing as well as they could with their bits in their mouths.

Murri succeeded in catching Amber without much

difficulty, and brought a tin bottle of water to Yesslett, who opened it and found that there was a little water swilling about at the bottom of it. With this the boy wetted George's lips and sprinkled his face, and he had the satisfaction of seeing a faint look of life return to the face that gleamed so white and ghastly in the moonlight. Fearing that the sight of blood would alarm Margaret and his aunt when they got back to the house, he washed it away with the rest of the water.

A few minutes afterwards Yesslett heard the welcome sound of voices and hurrying footsteps, and in another moment three or four men from the station and the white-clad figure of Margaret, who had managed to keep pace with the men, her awful anxiety giving her strength, were with him.

Margaret's great force of character stood her in good stead just then. She turned deathly pale when she saw her brother lying there, but she repressed all other expression of her emotion. The girl threw herself down by the side of the senseless boy, and raising his head laid it against the heart that was beating so strongly with love for him. She chafed his hands, and lifting back the moist hair from his forehead fanned him with a fold of her white skirt; but as his eyes remained closed and he gave no further sign of life she turned to her cousin, and in an agonised voice cried out—

"Oh, Yesslett, is he dead? Geordie, my poor Geordie!"

"No, he is not dead, I think he is only stunned. We must get him back as quickly as possible to the house. Aunt will know best what to do. I think he must have fallen from his horse, for I can find no sign of a wound about him."

"Where is Alec? What does it all mean?" asked Margaret, who now seemed to remember that her other brother was not present. "It is something very terrible, I'm sure, for Alec would never leave Geordie in this way. He must be dead, for as long as he drew breath he would never desert his brother."

"We thinks it is rather terrible, Miss," said Balchin, one of the men who had been questioning Murri whilst Margaret was attending to her brother, "From what we can make out of this black chap, Miss—it's Murri, Miss, as went with Mr. Alec and George—they've been set on by them bushrangers. He says, Murri do, that there was 'plenty much' of 'em, and that Mr. Alec shot wone of 'em dead, he was that mad like at seeing of Mr. George being throwed, and that then they ups—yes, Miss, the bushranger fellers—and takes Mr. Alec off along with them. That was the way he says they went, Miss," ended Balchin, pointing with a rough, red hand to the south.

"Yew can see there's bin a many 'osses 'ereabouts, by the way the gress is cut up," said one of the other men, pointing to the trampled turf.

"Yes," said Yesslett, "but we can't do anything in the matter of following them till morning, and we must get George home as quickly as possible."

As Yesslett spoke, two or three of the men stooped and picked up the senseless boy. These great rough fellows showed the utmost gentleness and care in the work, for they all were fond of the bright, cheery lad; indeed, Balchin, who had been on the run for many years, and had known him from the time he was a tiny child, could not make his voice steady as he spoke, try as he might.

Just before they came to the boundary fence of the paddock, Margaret's quick eyes saw something lying quite motionless, at some little distance away, in the shade of the great green tree. She pointed it out to Balchin, and fearing, she hardly knew what, she asked him to go and see what it was that lay so strangely there.

"You stay here, Miss, don't you move," said the man, fearing that the sight might be too awful a one for her to see ; " I'll come back and tell you, Miss."

He started off at the heavy, slouching trot that was peculiar to him, which looked so slow and ungainly, but which covered the ground so quickly. Two snarling dingoes started up and sneaked away from the body as the man approached. He rolled the dead man over with his foot, looked once at the face, and returned to where the little party waited for him by the gleaming fence.

"It be that thief Keggs, Miss, he've got what he deserves; yes, sir," said he, turning to Yesslett to include him in his remarks, "a bullet through the heart. He it were as brought them bushrangers here, I'll swear."

Slowly and sadly the little procession moved on its way to the house. Margaret was quite quiet; she walked along, dry-eyed, by the side of her brother, holding in her warm one his cold and heavy hand. Yesslett had dropped behind, and was trying to get every bit of information about Alec's capture that he possibly could from Murri. The black boy had not seen or understood all that had taken place, and his account of what had happened to, and been done by, the elder Law was so confused as to be of little assistance to them in forming plans for Alec's rescue.

One of the men had caught Amber and the horse that Murri had been riding, and had taken them to a place, a little way along the fence, where there were slip-panels, and getting them into the paddock, followed the rest of the party to the yard. Vaulty, Geordie's horse, was found next day, by one of the men on the station, a mile or two away from the place where his rider had been thrown.

The night was very calm, so calm that Mrs. Law, standing at the entrance to the paddock from the yard, could hear the steps of the horses and the low voices of the men before she could see the party that was approaching her. She could not rest in the house, and had felt compelled to come out of doors, though her limbs were trembling beneath her to such an extent that she could not stand without support. She could do nothing, for her agony of mind was not mitigated by activity of body ; all that she could do, poor soul, was to wait until the search party came back, whilst all the time her mother's heart was torn and racked with an agony of fear. The first words that she heard were these—it was Margaret who spoke.

“Run on, Yesslett, and try to prepare poor mother.”

Hearing those words she seemed to know the worst. She could not cry out, her parched lips refused to move, but she grasped the top rail of the fence with her icy hand to support herself. She could not get her breath, and the warm air, that was heavy with the aromatic scent of the gum trees, seemed to suffocate her. When Yesslett came upon her, as she stood near the gate to the yard, she could not speak ; she only lay her trembling hand upon his shoulder and waited for him to begin.

"It is Geordie, aunt; he is not dead but badly hurt," stammered poor Yess, who was quite unprepared for seeing his aunt so soon.

"Oh, thank Heaven for that," gasped the poor lady, bursting into tears, natural tears, that relieved her from the strain of her suspense.

Yesslett let her sob for a moment, and then, knowing that the best way to soothe her was to call for her assistance, he said—

"But it all depends upon you, aunt. You must be calm and tell us what to do, for Geordie is insensible, and we don't know how to act for the best."

"You are right, Chevalier. I am glad no one but you has seen me in my weakness," said Mrs. Law resolutely, and making a determined effort she became her own calm self again, and by the time the men carrying Geordie arrived at the gate she was composed and gave her orders with a steady voice.

In this way, senseless, powerless, and death-like, George Law returned to the home he had left so full of life and brightness and hope only a few short weeks before.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT BECAME OF ALEC.

LEAVING Geordie lying for dead, Alec turned his back upon Wandaroo, and surrounded by the gang of bushrangers, with whom he knew it was useless for him to attempt to cope, he rode along he knew not whither. At first he hardly noticed which way he was being taken ; his grief was so keen at the loss he had just undergone, and his chagrin at the frustration of all their hopes, when so near their fruition, so bitter, that all other feelings seemed withered up. A little later came the remembrance of those at home, and with the desire of being useful to them and helpful in the now quickly approaching time of their difficulties came a new wave of feeling which seemed to rouse him from the mental apathy into which he had fallen.

Without showing signs of his awakened observation, he began to take note of their route. He knew the whole country about Wandaroo so well that he recognised his position almost at once, although it was night. They had left the Wandaroo run behind them, and were then on Taunton's run, a great tract of land that had been allowed to slip back to a state of wildness years before, when the owner and his only son had been murdered by the *myalls*. Many of the outlying stations had been permitted to revert in this way some years ago when times were at their worst in Queensland, and when the unprotected pioneer families were often butchered by the blacks.

The party must have been riding for fully an hour when Alec shook off the cloud of lethargy that had enveloped him, for they were then many miles from Wandaroo. For some time past Alec had heard the sound of the men's voices as though he were in a dream, and without paying attention to them, but at last he distinguished Starlight's voice ; he was speaking to Wetch, his worthy lieutenant.

"They'll be tracking us to-morrow, and as there is no reason that we should let on where we are to be found, I think we had better get on to the Dixieville road, where our traces will be trodden out by the next flock of sheep that passes along."

This plan was carried out, and with the result that Starlight hoped for, as it was at this very place that the Wandaroo black boys, who tracked them next day, were thrown off the scent.

After riding for some distance along the rough, dusty, and ill-made track that did duty for a road between Bateman and the decaying little township of Dixieville, the party turned aside again, and continued its southerly direction. The appearance of the country began to be wilder again, and the fences, and whatever signs there were that the land had at one time been occupied, were broken and rotting away. These signs of decay and failure of purpose made the scene more desolate than it would have been had it never been touched, for there are few things sadder than to see a tract of country that has once been under cultivation, or turned to some useful purpose, reverting to its former state of wildness.

Alec judged from the talk and behaviour of the men that they were approaching the place that, for the time being, they considered their headquarters,

and which they dignified with the name of home. They had now been riding continuously for more than two hours since they had left the neighbourhood of Wandaroo, and this part of the country was new to Alec, although he had ridden once or twice along the Dixieville road. The land had evidently been thickly wooded at one time, and in places there were still great belts and patches of bush standing in all its primeval majesty and gloom. Once or twice their road lay through these wooded depths, and there the path was so dark that Alec did not attempt to guide his horse. The moon had not yet set, but the silver radiance which flooded all the topmost boughs failed to penetrate to the depths below, and the track lay all in darkness, which was the more profound in contrast with the patches of starlit sky that sometimes could be seen through openings in the roof of shade above. Alec was an old enough bushman to know that his horse would best find the way for itself; indeed the creature seemed to know the road well enough without guidance.

Shortly after passing through one of these stretches of bush they came upon a low, rambling building, from the open door of which a feeble light shone out. Alec had long given up hopes of seeing any signs of habitation thereabouts, and noticing this light, he instinctively turned his head to look at it, thinking that perhaps there was a chance of rescue for him there. Starlight, who was always near him, seemed to divine his thoughts, for he laid his hand on Alec's arm to attract his attention, and with a backward nod of his head towards the house, he said—

"You needn't look there. It is no go. They are friends of ours—and neighbours too, for we have

nearly come to the end of our journey—not openly friends, you know, but in a quiet way. They have given us many a useful hint and timely warning before now, and we, on our part, have been able to do many things for them. They often dispose of things for us that we have stolen. You see I make no stranger of you.”

The cool way in which he talked, and the perfect openness of his speech—hiding nothing of his own villainy, and not trying to make himself out anything but what he was—might at another time, and under different circumstances, have amused or interested Alec, but he could not think of him in any other light than that of the murderer of his brother, and every time that he spoke he raised Alec's anger and hatred again to boiling point.

Very soon after passing this building, which Alec heard one of the men speak of as “Lingan's,” the party, at a slackened pace, began to climb the slightly ascending opening between two dark hills which gave the name of Norton's Gap to the place. The ground was covered with coarse tall grass, and the young scrub that springs up over all lands that are deserted for any length of time. Towards the end of this flat and open sort of valley, in a very dreary-looking corner, out of sight of Lingan's, and shut in from the world of men by the black and low bare hills, were the crumbling ruins of a once large homestead.

The outer timbers of which the house was built were still standing, and some sort of door hung between the heavy, rough-hewn posts, but in many places the shingle roof had fallen in, pieces of the weather boarding were torn away, and the one chimney was tottering to its fall. Here and there great

pieces of the bark which had once covered the walls were flapping backwards and forwards in the soft night breeze, like the dark wings of some foul carrion bird. No smoke rose from the wide, old chimney, and no light shone out a welcome to them from the crazy doors or windows. The whole place was the picture of squalid discomfort and neglect; yet this house was the nearest approach to a home that any of these wretched men could ever expect to possess. For a life of danger, discomfort, wickedness, and squalor, with an occasional spell of foul indulgence and debauch, had these men outlawed themselves from the society of their fellows.

"Here we are, back again, minus two of our number, Pearson and Kearney, but I expect Kearney will turn up again. I don't think he was hurt," said Starlight, as the gang, having crossed what had once been the paddock, passed through a gap in the rotting fence into the yard.

"Yes, and a beastly hole it is to come back to," grumbled one of the men. "Not a soul about the place, and not a spark of fire alight. I wonder where that idiot Foster is."

It was evident that the men were sullen and out of humour at the ill success of their expedition, on which they had been absent for several days. They dismounted in silence, and each man, after unsaddling his horse, led it to a small paddock, the fence of which had been repaired in a hasty, untidy way, and turned it loose.

Starlight led Alec to the house, and kicking open the ill-hung door, shouted out—

"Foster!"

They were standing in a dark, close sort of pas-

sage, very unlike the usual entrance to a Queensland squatter's house, and Alec could see absolutely nothing but Starlight's black figure outlined against the grey space of sky that feebly shone through the open doorway. Como had followed him into the house, and he could feel the dog close by him. The presence of the dog, which kept quite close to his master, was a comfort to Alec; he could not feel quite alone as long as the faithful creature was there to thrust his cold muzzle into his hand, or to lay his great paw up on his knee from sheer love of companionship. Upon Starlight calling out a second time, they heard some one moving in a room close by them, then the sound of a match being struck, and the next minute a door was thrown open, and a blowsy, dishevelled-looking man appeared, holding a flaring tallow candle above his blinking eyes.

"I didn't hear you. I was asleep. So you've got back, have you?" said he, in a high, thin voice.

"Bless the man! I should think you could see that for yourself. Look alive now, we are all hungry, and want something to eat in less than no time."

Starlight led the way into the room as he spoke, and Alec followed, and all the men speedily were collected there, for Australians do not trouble themselves about grooming their horses or making them comfortable. They soon had a fire blazing, for there was a stack of dry wood in one corner of the room, and it was not unpleasant, though the night was far from cold. Foster brought in damper and part of a sheep, which some of the men proceeded to cut up and cook in a rough and ready method at the fire. A short time served for this, and when it was ready, Starlight turned to Alec with an air of the greatest politeness, and said—

"May I offer you a little of your own mutton, Mr. Law? It comes from Wandaroo, as we all of us prefer your strain of sheep to any other about here. Not so large as some, but of a finer flavour."

Although so sick at heart, and so thoroughly wretched, Alec could not help smiling at the cool impudence of the man, and he accepted a piece of his own sheep in a thankful spirit, for it was long since he had eaten, and he was completely worn out. Directly that supper was finished—it did not take Foster long to clear away—pipes were lighted, and a small keg of whisky being brought out from underneath a sort of rough side table, on which were piled the men's hats, pistols, and whips, the men began to smoke and drink and, what they called, "enjoy themselves." It appeared to Alec to be a poor sort of enjoyment that they experienced, for there was a furtive look of watchfulness on the faces of all of them, although they tried to hide this expression, and to wear a look of ease. He could see this eager look intensified if there were any unusual or sudden noise. Once when the faint sound of a dog barking down at Lingan's was carried to them on the quiet night air, two or three of the men sprang quickly to their feet and looked out in a way that spoke plainly enough of the constant state of painful strain their minds must be in.

Very little more was said to Alec that night about the gold seeking he was known to have been away upon. Starlight was trusting to Crosby's powers of persuasion to get the information that he wished for from the boy, so that he had not questioned him again himself. Since Crosby had spoken his little message of friendship to Alec he had not dared

to talk to him again ; he had, indeed, studiously avoided approaching him so that the men might have no cause for suspicion.

Although he tried hard to keep awake, nature was too strong for Alec, as she is for all of us, and soon after he had ended his supper he nodded where he sat. The grief and excitement that he had suffered that day, and the enormous fatigue he had endured, had quite worn him out, and he felt that if his life depended upon it he could not keep awake. Wetch, whose gloomy face was brightened for a time by the combined influence of whisky and tobacco, was the first to notice Alec's condition, and in, for him, a not unkind voice, he said—

“That chap there, Law, 'll be rollin' over into the fire before long if he don't go and lie down. Where shall we putt him, Boss?”

“'E can hev' my room on t'other side of the passage,” said one of the men, a little fellow, sallow and thin, whom they called “the cobbler,” or “snob,” indiscriminately.

“Thank you,” said Starlight, in his most affable tone, “but I prefer to have that rather slippery young gentleman under my own eye. You can have that corner of the room if you like,” said he, turning to Alec, who was blinking like an owl. “There is a blanket there, and perhaps you will excuse us going on with our conversation.”

The poor lad was only too glad to accept this offer, and rising from the overturned box on which he had been sitting, he stumbled across the room to the corner that Starlight indicated, and throwing himself down on the dirty blanket which was lying there, he instantly fell into a profound, deep sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CROSBY ACCOUNTS FOR HIMSELF.

IT was broad daylight when Alec awoke ; the sun was pouring a brilliant flood of light into the room through the broken, unscreened window, and he could hear the loud "chirring" of the locusts outside in the morning heat. The room he was in looked even dirtier and more miserable than it had appeared the night before. The floor could not have been cleaned for years, and dust lay thick upon everything that was not in constant use. The white wood table was unscoured, and was littered with bones and crumbs and fragments of stale food. Foster sometimes swept all these remains with his dirty hand on to the floor, but as yet, this morning, he had neglected to do so. A greasy old newspaper that was crumpled and torn with use was lying on the floor, where one of the men had let it fall the night before ; and a rusty candlestick, that was clogged with tallow, was standing at the edge of the table where the reader had left it when he rolled to bed. The frowsy hammock in which Starlight had slept was empty, the draggled blue blanket he had used was hanging over the side. Besides Alec there was no one in the room.

For half a moment, when he first awoke, he did not recognise the place he was in, but sitting up and looking round the uncleanly, slovenly room, with a shudder of disgust at his surroundings, he remembered only too vividly where he was. He got up and found

a battered galvanised iron bucket full of water at the other side of the hearth, and at this, taking off his tattered shirt, he proceeded, without soap or towels, to wash himself. He had moved into the stream of hot sunshine that poured into the room to dry himself, and with bended head was shaking the water out of his hair in a little dazzling shower of spots, when the creaking door was opened and Martin Crosby stepped into the room.

"Oh, you are awake at last?" said the great genial red-faced fellow, walking across the room and slapping Alec on his naked back. "I've been in to look at you once or twice, and each time found you sleeping like a top."

"Yes, awake and hungry."

"All right, put your jumper on, and I'll get you something. We can have a talk while you are eating."

"Where are Starlight and the other fellows?" said Alec, struggling into his shirt, which clung to his damp skin.

"They are down at Lingan's, and won't be back just yet. They left Foster and me to keep our eyes on you, so that you could not give us the slip."

"That's just what I want to do. You will help me, won't you?" said poor Alec, almost trembling with eagerness. "Remember your promise of last night."

"Yes, I'll help you to clear out of this vile den if I possibly can do it. Heaven knows how willingly I would get out of it myself," said Crosby, earnestly.

"Leave with me, then," whispered Alec, grasping his arm.

"I can't. It's no use. I'm in with them too deep.

If I did leave there's nothing I could turn my hand to, and nowhere that I could go. I'm done for. You don't know me I can see. I'm the man that did for Squires down in Brisbane. But I'd do it again, without a moment's hesitation, if I saw that villain serving that poor woman as he did before."

"No, I don't know anything about it. Who was Squires?"

"He was a low, South American sort of Spanish cove, who was mate to a ship from Rio. I met him at Ridley's. What! don't you know Ridley's? Then it is evident you don't know Brisbane—and none the worse for that," he added *sotto voce*. "Well, we had one or two bits of rows; he was always bumming round there and bossing everybody; and then one night I saw him striking a pretty, decent girl, from Troman's store in Wood Street, that I knew, so I ran up and caught him one with the stick I carried. I didn't mean to hit the little beast so hard, but I was angry, and had a drop on board, and the chap fell down without a word at my feet.

"I tried to bring him round, but he never stirred a muscle. I should have faced it out if I'd been by myself, but Annie was in an awful fright, and lugged me away when the folks began to come up. I got out of Brisbane that night, and had the bad luck to drop in with Kearney—I used to know him years ago—and I told him all about it, and he brought me up here to be out of the way. It served that little brute right, but I can't forget his ghastly face as he fell under the street lamp.

"If it weren't for that I'd have cut this concern as soon as I found out who and what Starlight was.

But I'm tied here; wherever I went every one would know that I was Squires' murderer."

During the last few words, unseen by either of the two men, Foster had been standing by the door that Crosby had left partly open when he came into the room. He had heard all the last words of Crosby's self accusation, and, perhaps feeling sorry for the evident distress of the young fellow, or perhaps moved by that desire to be the first to tell a startling piece of news, which we all feel, he said with a loud laugh—

"Well, you must be a fool to believe that any longer. Why, that Squires chap is as well as you are, and is 'alf-way back to Rio by this time. We knew it three days a'ter you came 'ere, but Starlight told us not to let on about it as he wanted to keep you in our lot."

With clenched great fists and indrawn breath Crosby listened to Foster's story. His ruddy face flushed redder, but the hardened, reckless look upon it passed away.

"Thank Heaven!" he uttered brokenly and fervently, and his eyes for a moment grew dim. As Foster, still laughing at the credulity and simplicity of the fellow, left the room with the saddle and bridle he had come for, Crosby turned to Alec with a great sigh of relief, and said—

"Then I'm not a murderer;" he laughed an excited sort of laugh as he spoke, and his face brightened. "What a weight that man has taken from my heart. All these two last weeks I have felt utterly hard and reckless, and I didn't care a jot what I did or what became of me. Confound you, Starlight," said he, bitterly, and bringing his fist down on the table with a sounding crash, "I'll not forget this."

"Hush!" said Alec, moving round to where Crosby sat. "Don't speak so loudly; there's no knowing, in this den of thieves, who may be listening. I am glad of this for your sake," said he, laying his hand warmly on the other fellow's shoulder, and giving him a little congratulatory shake by it. "For my sake, too, for you will try to get away with me, now. Won't you?"

Crosby nodded and looked up. His face was wonderfully changed in expression in the last few minutes. The strained, uneasy expression that was visible behind the dare-devil recklessness of it was gone, and even the anxiety that was still apparent in it looked less hard and corrosive.

"I don't know how it is to be done," he said, "but we will try. Starlight, confound him, is so sharp. Whatever you do, be careful before him."

"If I could only let them know at Wandaroo where I was they might send help."

"That would be no good, I fear. Starlight is not one to be taken unawares, he'd get to know of it. Besides, in the first place, it is impossible to send any message."

"If I could only let them know that I was alive I shouldn't care. I have a mother and sister, and they will be breaking their hearts at their double loss. I know Margaret——"

"*Margaret!* Is Margaret Law your sister—a beautiful, tall, dark girl? What an idiot I've been; why of course she is, you are very like her."

"Have you ever seen my sister?" asked Alec, with the utmost astonishment.

"Yes," said the great fellow, blushing a rosy red, like any girl; "many times last year at my uncle's house."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Alec, a sudden light bursting upon him. "Then you are old Peter Crosby's nephew!"

"Yes. I used to live with him. He adopted me when I was a lad, but he has turned me out since then; he said he couldn't afford to keep me any longer; I ate too much."

"Miserly old brute! Why he is as rich as Croesus."

"He was quite right, poor old chap," said Crosby, with that tenderness which the very strong and healthy often have for the old and weak. "I have been an awful fool, and haven't lived as decently as I might. He is old now, and couldn't bear to see me squandering my money, although it was my own; he thought I should be asking him for more when mine was all gone. So he turned me out before that time came. He was very good to me when I was a little un."

Whilst Alec was talking with Crosby, Como, having made a little tour of inspection round the house on his own account, came into the room, and seeing food on the table and no one very near it he thought he could not do better than help himself. This he could easily do, as he stood so high that his head was above the level of the table. Having demolished the food, that in his excitement Alec had hardly touched, the dog approached his master, looking, but for a crumb on the side of his mouth, the picture of canine innocence. With a sideway wriggle of his hind quarters, and with a preliminary wave—it was too stately a movement to be called a wag—of his tail, he laid his head on Alec's knee.

Alec always respected dogs' feelings—which are

much more acute than most people think—so he noticed the dog, and, without interrupting his talk with Crosby, he caressed Como's tawny head and ears. He was listening to his companion, yet all the time there was a mental picture before him of Como's master lying unburied by that charred black stump, and exposed to the garish sunlight. He could not forget his loss, it was too recent, and the pain of it too keen; the events of the last night seemed burned into his mind in a series of indelible pictures. Suddenly an idea flashed into his mind, and leaping up from his seat, he exclaimed—

"Can you get me a bit of paper and ink or pencil?"

"Whatever for?" asked Crosby, surprised by Alec's abrupt movement, and by the earnestness of his face and voice.

"Como will take a message."

"And who in the name of fate is Como?"

"This dog here. Hundreds of times has Geordie—my brother," Alec explained in a voice that shook though he tried to keep it steady, "sent him home to the head station with messages from all parts of the run. He might find his way from here. Anyway it is a chance. Eh, Como, will you?" said Alec.

The dog knew that they were speaking of him, and with ears pricked up and inquiring eyes, he looked at Alec as though waiting for an explanation.

It was with difficulty that Crosby could find what they wanted, but at last he discovered, on the decrepit side table, which was littered with bridles, foul empty bottles, odd bits of iron and straps and rubbish of all sorts, a stockman's dusty pocket-book, in which there were a few unused pages, and with a stump of pencil

still fastened in it by the sticky and worn elastic band.

"Here we are!" said he, bringing these trophies in triumph to Alec. "You must look sharp, for I expect they will be coming back directly."

For a moment Alec sat quite still without putting pencil to paper; he had so much to say that he didn't know where to begin. At last he began to write swiftly. He looked up, after a minute or two, at Crosby, who was leaning out of the window, whistling softly to himself, and said—

"How am I to tell them where I am? I can't describe this place."

"Oh, say Norton's Gap, south of the Dixieville road, just after you have passed by Badger's Creek. Tell them to ask for Lingan's. Most people know where that is, though it is out of the way and few come to it."

For a moment or two the stump of pencil rapidly travelled over the paper, and then again Alec paused.

"I don't know what is best to be done. They can't send enough men after me to capture Starlight and all the rest, for, not counting you, of course, there are seven of them including Foster."

"Yes, and probably Lingan and his son would help them, and Lingan's son's wife, too, Big Eliza, who rather likes Starlight, and who is a regular Tartar, and nearly six feet high into the bargain. I can't think why a man, when he does want to marry, chooses a woman like a grenadier with a head of hair like a bearskin."

Alec could not help smiling at this pleasant portrait of Mrs. Lingan, junior, for Martin had a very dry and humorous way of saying things.

"I don't like the idea of sneaking off without a

bit of a row with them," said Alec, who was still longing for vengeance; "but I suppose that we must as they are so strong. If I could only have it out with Starlight I shouldn't so much mind."

"You must look on that as a pleasure deferred. Now, then, have you got that letter ready?"

"Yes. I have told them to try to communicate with me through you. I've said that to-morrow night at eleven o'clock you will be on the track that leads from the Dixieville road to Lingan's. I have said what you are like. I expect old Macleod, our manager, will come, and you and he may be able to concoct a plan. I don't think I can say any more."

"Come on, then."

"Will you do it?"

"Do it! of course."

Alec called Como, who was sitting on his haunches in the sun idly snapping at the flies which buzzed about him, and with a bit of frayed string that Crosby produced from his pocket, he tied the all-important letter round the neck of the dog. He folded the paper as small as possible, and placed it underneath the dog's neck, and hid the string in the hair of his neck, where it was longer and thicker than elsewhere.

"I don't think Starlight will see that."

"Not unless he stops him."

"Oh, he won't do that if Como once gets a start."

They took the dog to the front of the house, and Alec, pointing towards Wandaroo, tried to start him off. But the dog did not seem to understand; in vain Alec said, "Home, Como," "Home, then," "Good dog," "Go home," any one of which would have been enough from Geordie. He was in despair about it,

for the dog would not leave him, and he could conceive no other plan of communicating with the station. At last Crosby came to his rescue with a suggestion.

"Try to make him go back to your brother. He may know what you mean when he hears his name."

It was hard for poor Alec to say it, believing, as he did, that his brother was lying dead in the trampled grass where he had fallen the night before, but he remembered how much was at stake, and manfully controlling his voice, he spoke again to the dog, who was looking up at him wistfully.

"Hi, then, Como. Home. Take that to Geordie."

It almost seemed that he did recognise the name, for with a quick, short bark, and an intelligent flourish of the tail, he started off to Wandaroo.

Very anxiously they watched the dog, as with his long stride he quickly covered the ground, though he appeared to be trotting so easily. He travelled at the same easy pace, and without looking back, till he came to the corner which hid Lingan's house and buildings from the place where they stood. Here the dog suddenly made a bolt of it, and rushing madly along was out of their sight in a moment. They could hear the noise of several men shouting, and then the sharp crack of a pistol shot. Alec turned pale and bit his lip, and looked to Crosby for confirmation of his fears.

"They've seen him, the brutes, and tried to stop him by force, as they failed to do it by persuasion. He may have got off. We must go in. Don't let Starlight see us here. And try not to look so anxious."

They returned to the house, and a moment or two later Starlight and two of the other men came into the room. In a perfectly natural manner, and

with rather a complaining tone in his voice, Crosby said—

“What a time you have been. I thought you were never coming back again. I don’t want to be boxed up here all day.”

“We wanted to see what Lingan had got for those bullocks for us, and it took some time to settle up.”

“What bullocks?”

“Some that strayed up here, and whose marks we couldn’t make out,” said one of the men.

“Don’t be a fool, Evans. Why, some bullocks that we drove off from Sheridan’s station, all the marks on which we got rid of. But it was before you joined us, Crosby, so you don’t get any of the plunder,” said Starlight.

“What was that shot I heard just now?” asked Crosby, in an incidental manner.

With what sickening anxiety Alec awaited Starlight’s answer! He almost feared to listen, yet he could hardly breathe till he heard what was Como’s fate.

“Oh, just as we were coming out of Lingan’s yard we saw that dog, that great beast of yours, Law, trotting calmly off. We called to it, but that made it start off at full rush, so I lugged out my snapper and let fly at it.”

“Well?” said Martin.

“Why, the brute got away. He was going too quick, I think. But it doesn’t matter. We don’t want a great hulking brute of that sort about the place. He would eat as much as any two men.”

When Starlight so lightly dismissed the matter, he little knew what momentous results to him and

his gang depended upon that "hulking brute" getting safely away. Alec breathed freely again when he heard that Como had managed to give them the slip, and Martin could not prevent a faint smile flickering in his sunny face. Starlight noticed it, and said—

"What are you grinning at, Crosby?"

"At my own thoughts, which are distinctly comic."

"Well, don't keep the joke to yourself."

"Ah, that's the funny part of it. *You* wouldn't think it at all amusing."

CHAPTER XXIV.

COMO'S ERRAND.

ALTHOUGH the heat was great, for the sky was cloudless, and the shade, where there was any, inviting and cool, Alec's trusty messenger tarried not for rest or coolness. He seemed to know the importance of the news he carried, for he trotted along without a pause. The only time that Como had travelled that way had been the night before, but with that unerring instinct, which we can so little understand, he made straight for Wandaroo. Except once, to drink at a little cattle-trampled pool which the recent rains had partly filled, he never stopped till he reached the head station, where he arrived dusty, foot-sore, and panting, about two hours after he left Norton's Gap.

Dogs generally seem to possess a keen sense of duty, a quality which is, unfortunately, only too often wanting in man, the nobler animal ; and Como made no fuss, and took no credit to himself for this arduous morning's work, knowing that, after all, he had only done what he ought. Mankind, on the other hand, which will not admit the extent of its moral obligations, generally greatly plumes itself when it does occasionally recognise one of its bounden responsibilities, never thinking for a moment that the virtuous action which it considers it has done is really an imperative duty.

Como, who was a privileged animal, made straight

for the large general room of the house, and without being seen by any one, entered the door. Finding the room quite silent and empty, he passed carefully out between the muslin curtains on to the sunny boards of the broad verandah. He looked up and down it, but finding that it was as unoccupied as the room, he turned, and pattering along the planks, ran to the kitchen.

Mrs. Beffling, the cook, was standing over the fire, screening her hot, red face from the blaze with a tin plate, cooking something nourishing for the patient, and being intent upon her work, as a good cook should be, she did not observe the presence of the dog. But Como, thinking it was time that some one noticed him, lifted a paw and laid it on her dress. The good woman looked down, and recognising the missing dog, she dropped the tin plate with a crash upon the floor, and lifting up her hands, opened her mouth preparatory to a good scream, but remembering the instructions given that morning by the doctor she snapped her jaws together again before a sound had had time to come out.

Taking the little saucepan from the fire, and placing it carefully on the hob of home-made bricks by the side of the grate, she waddled from the kitchen along the cool, dark passage to the door of the boys' room. There she softly knocked, and Margaret came out.

"Ho! come into the kitching, miss, I've had sich a turn." Here the good old creature thought it would be "genteel-like" to appear faint, so she tottered and gave a gasp.

"Now, Beffy, don't be an old silly. What is it?"

"Ho, miss, Como 've come back."

"No! Where is he?" said Margaret, coming out and quietly closing the door behind her.

"He were in the kitching, miss, a minnut ago. I were standin' over the fire a hottin' up that bought beef-tea, miss, which it do not compare to mine, though I says it as shouldn't. For my *best* beef-tea, which I'm sure I should make for poor dear Master George, is as stiff as glue when cold, and almost gums the lips together when took hot. I learnt how to make it in England, miss, when I was kitching maid, under a aunt of mine who was cook, at Kepton Park, wheer the Honrabble *and* Reverent Mr. ——"

"Yes, yes, but what about Como?"

"Ho, to be sure; Como, of course, yes, miss. I were a-standin' over the fire a-hottin' ——"

"Oh, you've told me that before."

"When in leaps Como as bold as brass, and he jumps up agen me, he do, as though to say like 'Beffling, I'm clemmed.'"

This was rather a stretch of imagination on the part of the worthy old soul, but she was so excited that she could not help a little exaggeration, which was quite harmless she thought, and made the story so much more interesting.

However, there was Como true enough when they reached the kitchen, and glad was he to see Margaret when she came in. He had taken a drink of water from one of the tins in the kitchen, and then had stretched himself at full length in his old place beneath the table under the window. He sprang up when he saw Margaret, and rushed to her, and the girl, with tears in her eyes, knelt down on the floor and fondled the dog. They made a very pretty picture,

Mrs. Beffling thought, as she stood with her bare red arms akimbo, and her head on one side looking at them.

"Poor old Como, how hot and tired you are. Have you come from Alec?" said the poor girl, with tears in her voice. "Oh! Alec, Alec, where are you? If you could only tell us, Como, if he be alive and where he is. We are in such trouble, doggie." She laid her arms round Como's neck and wiped away upon his smooth forehead a great tear from her cheek. The dog tried to lick her face, forgetting for a moment, it is to be feared, the letter round his neck, in his chivalrous efforts to comfort beauty in distress. Poor Geordie was quite right, Como had the feelings of a true gentleman.

Suddenly Margaret felt the folded bit of paper that was tied under Como's neck. In a voice that rang with excitement, she cried out—

"Give me a knife! quick, quick!"

"Lawks! miss, what for?" said Mrs. Beffling, starting. "You isn't going to kill the dog, sureli!"

"Don't be a donkey," said Margaret, holding out her hand, and forgetting all her boarding-school manners in her excitement.

"No, miss, for sure," replied the cook, snatching a knife from the table and handing it to her.

"Stand still," said Margaret, trembling with eagerness, as she slipped her forefinger under the string and raised it from the dog's neck. She sawed the string through, and, with fingers that shook so from nervousness that she could hardly untie the knots, she at last opened the letter and spread it out. She did not rise, but kneeling where she was on the floor, with the light from the kitchen

window pouring on to her flushed cheek, she read the letter:—

“DEAREST MOTHER,—

“I don’t know how much you know of what has happened to us. Murri may have told you if he got off. If you know nothing prepare yourself for a great trouble. We had almost got home last night when we were set on by bush-rangers and (I don’t know how to tell you, it is so terrible) Geordie, when I was away from him for a minute, was thrown from his horse and killed. I feel as though it were my fault, though I don’t think I could have helped it if I had been close by. I am just heartbroken, and if it were not for you and Maggie I should not care if I never came back. You are all I have now. Crosby says I must make haste ; he is a fellow here who is helping me. I am kept by Starlight at a place called Norton’s Gap, which lies south of the Dixieville road, directly after you have passed Badger’s Creek. Crosby says ask for Lingan’s. This place is close to Lingan’s. Let Macleod, or some one, be on the path between the Dixieville road and Lingan’s to-morrow night at eleven to try and arrange things. Crosby will be there. He is a big, handsome fellow, with a yellow beard and hair, and clear blue eyes. You will easily know him.”

Ah ! Margaret, Margaret, what makes you start in that way ? You would blush if any one were looking at you now ; as it is, you grow pale.

“Let the police at Bateman know where Starlight is ; they will be here soon enough then. This is the last bit of paper I have got. I myself am quite well and unhurt. Would it were Geordie instead. He was worth a dozen of me. If you have not found him he is lying by that split gum we burnt, just beyond the Dip. I killed the man that knocked Geordie off his horse. Don’t agree to any ransom for me. Crosby says Starlight will try it on.

ALEC.”

All the last few lines were so cramped and crowded together that Margaret could hardly make

their meaning out. But she did at last, and letting her hands, still holding the letter, sink idly into her lap, she stayed where she was without moving and deep in thought. It was the clattering of horses into the yard that made her look up, and the next instant Yesslett dashed into the kitchen.

"How is he now, Mrs. Beffling?" he whispered, as though his voice would disturb Geordie at the other end of the house. "What did the——oh, Margaret, I didn't see you. What did the doctor say? How long was he here?"

"He got here at seven, just after you and Balchin started out with Murri and Baluderree. He says it was concussion of the brain, but that if we keep him quite quiet he will soon get all right. It was the greatest wonder, he says, that he was not killed straight off."

"Has he gone?"

"Yes, he has told mother what to do, and he has been gone half an hour. Macleod has gone with him to tell the police all about it, and to make them try to find Alec, but we don't know whether they are at Bateman or Parra-parra."

"Ah! poor old Alec, we shall have to think about him now that Geordie is going on all right. If we only knew where he was we wouldn't wait for the police. We can't trace them, Margaret, beyond the Dixieville road. Murri and that other black boy from the camp easily tracked them that far, and then we lost them; a mob of cattle had passed along early this morning or last night and trampled out every hoof mark."

"Never mind, Yess; this will tell you where he is," said Margaret, rising and holding out the letter.

"Como brought it just now. Make haste and read it. I must go and tell mother."

Yesslett read the letter with many little muttered expressions of astonishment and sympathy. What he said when he ended it and handed the crumpled paper to Margaret was very characteristic of him.

"Look here, Margaret. Macleod may be away a day or two, and even then may not bring the police with him. I can't bear to think of Alec eating his heart out and believing that Geordie is dead, whilst all the time he is alive and getting better every hour. I shall go and let him know that we are working for him, and that Geordie is alive."

"But, Yesslett, it will be running such a risk."

"Not if I go alone," said the boy, shrewdly. "In the first place, they can't know that Alec has sent the letter to us, and they will think that one—er—*man* would never trust himself with them alone. I shall be all right, never fear."

He spoke boldly, though modestly, and the light that glowed in his steady eyes said more than his words. He had not, however, quite got rid of a trick of his old nervous manner, that of rubbing the palm of his hand on the back of his breeches. This he still did when greatly moved or excited.

"We ought to speak to mother about it."

"No, don't say anything to her. She has enough on her mind without another responsibility. I shall go on my own hook."

"It is good of you to do all this for us. You are going into danger for our sakes, Chevalier. At any rate, take my advice in this. Don't go in those clean breeches and shirt. Make yourself look dirty and more like a station hand, so that if any of the

bushrangers do see you they won't want to stick you up, and you can go to that place near Norton's Gap—what does Alec call it?—as though you wanted a job."

"That's not a bad idea, Margaret."

"You won't be going just yet. I want to see you before you start to send a message to Alec. It will be no use your getting there before evening. I must go now. Beffy, see that Mr. Yesslett has a good breakfast, he has had nothing to-day. And get something for Balchin at the same time." Saying this, with the letter in one hand and the little saucepan of beef-tea in the other, Margaret left the kitchen very thoughtfully.

"Yes, miss, for sure. I likes to see men eat well, and you must be keen, Master Yesslett. Draw up t' table—if y' likes to wait I'll get a cloth. Begin a' the bread 'n' butter whiles I poach 'e a couple of eggs. I knows how y' like 'em, not hard, but set like. Then I'll have a chop down in a brace o' shakes, as my aunt used t' say. There, there, begin, then. Don't sit a thinking; nothin' 'll come out o' your head if y' put nothing into y' stomach."

"I've got a great deal to think of," said Yesslett, looking up, with a smile at her quaintness. "There is Alec in the hands of the bushrangers, and only me to get him out."

"Ah, an' fine an' hungry he'll be, I'll be bound. But you won't help him by refusin' y' vittles, so here's th' eggs to go on with, an' if the sizzelin' o' them chops don't give you a appetite for 'em, I don't know what will."

"Tell Balchin to come in, then. He's as hungry as I am."

CHAPTER XXV.

YESSLETT'S ADVENTURE.

YESSLETT did not start for several hours after he had formed the resolution of riding to Alec's assistance. He made inquiries from different people about the station, and found that he could easily ride to Norton's Gap in two hours and a half, and as he did not wish to arrive there much before sunset, he waited till the long, slow afternoon had passed its prime. He had taken Margaret's advice, and had changed his clothes for old and very shabby ones; he had found an old hat, that looked disreputable even in that part, where new ones were a rarity, and with this flapping a limp and torn brim over his forehead, and with burst and ragged boots, long innocent of blacking, he looked in as poor a plight as any out-of-work lad could do, and as little like the clean and fairly well-clad Yesslett Dudley as it was possible for him to appear.

There was one thing he had determined to do, of the advisability of which he was not fully convinced, and that was to take Alec's horse Amber with him. He knew he could not ride the chestnut himself, for the spirited creature would never let any one but Alec mount him, so he intended leading it by the bridle. His reason for this resolution was hardly plain to himself, but he had some half-formed idea in his brain of possibly managing an escape for his cousin, and he knew that Amber would be invaluable in any such

attempt, could he only succeed in getting Alec away for a moment from the men who detained him. Yesslett had no definite plan in his mind when he resolved to take this second horse; he was trusting, in a very boyish manner, to that good fortune which it is so difficult for the young to believe does not always await them. It was this blind confidence that "something would turn up" which prompted his action, and trusting implicitly to Providence, though at the same time with a certain belief in himself, he set out on his Quixotic errand.

Yesslett travelled quietly, wishing to keep his horses as fresh as possible on the chance of his requiring their services that night. He followed the same route that he had passed over in the morning when tracking the bushrangers, and struck the Dixieville road very near the place where Alec had turned on to it the night before. The road was very little used since the dwindling township of Dixieville had gone down in the scale, and at that hour it was quite deserted. Yesslett had, however, carefully primed himself with instructions before he left Wandaroo, and keeping to the road till he came to what he thought, from the descriptions of it given to him, must be Badger's Creek, he turned southward by the side of the shadowy gulch and rode boldly on towards the dark, wild stretch of bush before him. There was no definite road to Norton's Gap and Lingan's, but the frequent passage of the bushrangers' horses and the marks of the Lingan's carts and cattle had formed a sort of track which was indistinct and broad over the more open ground, but which narrowed in again to something bearing the semblance to a path when the way lay through the uncleared bush.

It was nearly sunset by the time that Yesslett had come to the edge of the last belt of bush. He could see the rambling and ill-kept building of the Lingo's station from there, and knew that he had arrived at the end of the first stage of his work. What lay beyond he could not tell; it all depended on chance; he would have to adapt his plans to circumstances. He felt that he was pitting himself against an unknown force, but he believed, as indeed seemed probable, that his very insignificance would be his security. No one would believe that a boy would thus attempt to challenge, single handed, Starlight and all his band. Yesslett himself was quite aware of his own weakness, and that was where his strength lay; he knew that to attempt an appeal to force would be ridiculous, and that his only chance of success in getting Alec away lay in craftiness and cunning.

He did not leave the shelter of the trees and undergrowth of the bush, by which he was quite screened from observation from the house, but directly he saw the buildings he turned to the left and leading his horses into the thicknesses of the bush he fastened them both securely to the trunk of a tree. Both horses had been trained to stand quite still, without pulling at the bridle or endeavouring to get away, when fastened in this manner, and as Yesslett had let them drink only a short time back, and as he had been wise enough to bring a feed of maize—a luxury they rarely got—for each horse, he felt sure that they would remain there quietly enough, at any rate, for an hour or two. He carefully marked the position of the tree to which he had tied the horses, even walking to it several times from the path so that he might make quite sure of finding it at night. At last he was

satisfied that he could not mistake the place, and putting on a bold front he left the bush and stepped out into the open ground that lay between it and Lingan's.

Yesslett remembered that Alec had said in his letter that the house he was kept at was close to Lingan's, and as he wanted to reach the former place he began to look about him for Lingan's buildings. He could see no sign of a house except the one before him, and he thought he should have, after all, to go to the door and ask. The place looked deserted; he could see no sign of any one about the house or yard, a mildewed look of sloth and neglect lay upon everything; and instead of being alive with all the usual busy sounds of station life the whole place seemed asleep. Yesslett had approached within a hundred yards of the fence, which enclosed what had once been the garden, when he saw a faint path that seemed to lead along the little valley between the hills at the back of Lingan's. Thinking that this might take him to the place he sought, he turned aside, leaving the buildings on his left, and began to follow this track.

It was not very long before he saw, as he ascended the valley, the house for which he was searching, and without waiting to think what his line of action would be he walked calmly towards it. It must be owned that there was a very quickly beating heart beneath this quiet exterior; but Yesslett had made up his mind to see the inside of that ugly tumbledown dwelling, for he felt convinced that that was where his cousin was kept prisoner, and he was more determined than before, now that he was actually on the spot, to get him out some way or another.

There were several men lounging about outside the house with that appearance of weariness which idleness produces when time hangs heavily upon one's hands. They were leaning against the house on the posts of the old fence, as though the exertion of standing up was more than they could manage. They spoke a word to each other now and then without moving their short pipes from between their teeth. They watched with interest the dusty and rather ragged looking boy as he walked towards them, for visitors to this place were rare ; and in their state of tedium and weariness any interruption was welcome. They did not say anything to Yesslett till he approached quite close to them, but they looked at him fixedly ; and he found their deliberate scrutiny rather embarrassing, but his appearance must have remained natural enough as nothing about him seemed to strike them as curious. When he had come quite near to them, one of the men, who was sitting on a stump of wood by the side of the door, leaning forward with his elbows on his parted knees, and his hands lightly clasped before him, said to him—

"Well, young Ugly, what d' you want at this shanty?"

"Is this Lingan's?" said Yesslett by way of answer.

"No, this ain't Lingan's. This yere do—main is Star——"

"Now, then, don't be a fool," interrupted another of the men in a surly voice, turning his head fiercely towards the first speaker.

"Fool yerself, Wetch! I ain't said nothing."

"No, but you was just a-goin' to," said Wetch, in the same savage voice. "No, this ain't Lingan's.

This is Brown's run, this is, and old Brown's out just now. You must a' passed Lingan's to get 'ere."

"Does *he* want a boy? I couldn't see any one stirring down below there," said Yesslett, with a backward nod of his head.

"No, he don't want a boy, so you can clear," said Wetch, drawing his dirty pipe from his dry, cracked lips, and making a wave with it in the direction of the valley.

"Well, do you know any one about here who is in want of a lad?" said Yesslett, as loudly as he dare, on the chance of Alec's hearing and recognising his voice.

"What are you yellin' at—I ain't deaf?"

"No, but you are very stupid," said a rich voice from the doorway; and looking up Yesslett saw Starlight, with a folded paper in his hand, standing on the lintel. "What is that you want, boy? Here, come into the house, there's a light there; it is getting so dark outside that I can't see you."

Thus, in the easiest manner in the world, Yesslett gained the first step of his purpose. He followed Starlight into the room and cast a rapid glance around it. There was only one tallow candle burning on the table, at which Starlight had been writing, but the room was not very dark, for although dusk had fallen, the warm glow from the sunset sky still lingered there. He could see that Alec either had not heard his voice or had not recognised it, for he did not look up as he came into the room, but sat, with one leg tucked up under him on the rough bench leaning dejectedly at the side of the table.

As Yesslett followed Starlight into the room he managed, unseen by the bushranger, to grasp Alec's

forearm firmly to attract his attention, and under cover of Starlight's voice, who was speaking to him, he stooped down as swift as a swallow, and breathed so faint a whisper into Alec's ear that he barely caught it—

"Geordie is all right."

So utterly surprised was Alec at finding Yesslett in the room, so astonished at the suddenness of it, and so overjoyed at the glorious news that that faint whisper conveyed to him, that he could not repress a start and an ejaculation of wonder.

"What's that?" said Starlight, sharply.

"I didn't speak," said Yess, innocently.

"Let me look at you," said Starlight, taking the candle from the table and holding it above Yesslett's face. "I think I can give you a bit of a job if you are honest. I am always most particular about employing honest people only." Here Starlight winked exquisitely, with the eye that was hidden from Yesslett, at some of the men who had come into the room. "Are you honest?"

Now Yesslett was the soul of fun, he never could resist a joke, and now, although in the very hands of as murderous a gang of fellows as was ever gathered together, the thought of giving Starlight a home thrust was to his mind so exquisitely comic as to be quite irresistible. Looking as innocent as a babe, he gazed straight into Starlight's eyes and said, without a flicker of a smile—

"Honest! I hope so, as such things go. I am poor, so perhaps I haven't the same honesty as you and these other gentlemen have, who have horses and dollars too, but honesty enough to prevent me wanting to steal 'em. Is that honest enough, sir?"

Alec sat perfectly aghast at Yesslett's impudence and temerity ; but Starlight only broke out into a peal of his beautiful, irresistible laughter, and turning to Crosby, said—

“That is a nasty jar for such of us as have consciences—you and me, for instance, Crosby.” Then turning to Yesslett, he said, “You can earn a supper and a shilling by taking this letter to that house just down below there. If they ask you where you got it, you must say that a man met you on the Dixieville road and gave it you, and paid you for taking it to Lingan's.”

“Oh ! but he didn't, you know—you gave it me,” said Yesslett, looking exceedingly simple.

“Poor but honest !” said Starlight, in a theatrical tone, to the five or six guffawing fellows in the room. “Gentlemen, behold what you, *perhaps*, were once. A long time ago,” added he, in a half whisper. “My boy, these scruples do you credit ; but let me point out to you that you will be my paid agent, my representative, and that if there be any slight falsehood about it,” here he gave a little sigh, and gently shook his head, “mine alone will be the blame, and I alone will undertake to bear the consequences. One or two extra are of little consequence to me,” whispered he to the man who was nearest to him.

“All right,” said Yesslett, who began to enjoy playing his part now that he saw how well it was going. “Where is the shilling ?”

“Oh, the sophistication of the youth of this generation !” said Starlight, with mock melancholy, as he produced the shilling from his pocket. “I have observed that these honest folk are always the most doubtful of others' honesty. Excuse me, I must shut

my eyes—it is too painful ; I feel convinced that this simple child of nature is about to ring that sterling coin."

"I always bites them," said Yesslett, with a countrified grin, and suiting the action to the word.

"This is appalling. So young and yet so full of guile. It looks as though you were doubtful of my character," said Starlight, in a voice as of one pained and surprised at any such insinuation.

"Oh, no, sir," said Yess, shaking his head in an innocent puzzled manner, but enjoying his own double meaning with the keenest zest, "I'm not doubtful of it at all."

One or two of the men, who were of a humorous turn, roared with laughing at this keen thrust, which was all the more delightful at coming from so innocent and simple a lad as Yesslett appeared to be, and Starlight joined heartily in the laughter, and said—

"Take the simpleton away before he makes me ill."

"I don't see nothin' t' laff at," said Wetch. "Give the boy his supper and let him go."

"'Tis excellent advice, most learned Wetch," said Starlight ; and then turning to Kearney, who had rejoined them that morning, he added, "but it appears, in Wetch's case, at any rate, that 'mirth dwelleth not with wisdom.' That boy would be a fortune to us, Kearney, with that innocent face of his."

"Ah, but it would so soon change !"

At which both worthies laughed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ESCAPE FROM NORTON'S GAP.

WHILST Starlight was joking with Kearney, Alec got up from his seat by the table, and without taking any notice of Yesslett he strolled to the open window, at which, as was his frequent custom, Crosby was leaning out whistling softly to himself. Supporting himself carelessly against the warped frame, from which the paint had bubbled up and chipped away, and with his brown flushed face turned up to the stars, which now began to burn in the fast darkening sky, Alec said in a low voice to his friend—

“Go on whistling, don't look round. That fellow who has just come in is my cousin, Yesslett Dudley. He has come to try to get us off. They have had my letter. He says my brother is not dead; I could hardly help yelling with delight.”

Alec spoke in a whisper, and Martin kept on whistling his tune as though in utter vacancy of mind, but, without looking at Alec, he nodded his head in time to the music to show that he heard him and understood.

“When he has had his supper—plucky beggar, how well he does it,” Alec went on in the same low voice—“and goes out with that letter of Starlight's, you must follow him, and hear what he has to say.”

Fearing to attract attention by remaining more than a minute or two at the window with Alec, Martin stepped back to the table, where Yesslett, with

an appearance of great enjoyment, was pitching into a piece of cold meat and a great lump of damper.

People say there is such a thing as honour amongst thieves ; there may be, but thieves seem very doubtful of it themselves, for living in a state of outlawry, and often with a price upon their heads, they grow exceedingly suspicious of each other, and are in constant fear of treachery from one member or another of the gang. This was the case just now. The letter that Starlight had just written, which he had hired Yesslett to take to Lingan's, was the present object of suspicion, and several of the men had whispered together about it. At last Yesslett, having finished his supper ; pushed the seat back and rose from the table, and Starlight handed him the letter, saying—

“There now, be off. Mind you fulfil your part of the contract. I've given you the shilling and the supper ; you therefore must deliver the letter, and say what I told you.”

“Before the boy takes the letter, me and one or two wants to know what's in it,” said Middance, a short, stout man, who was standing by the door rather sheepishly swinging one leg.

“Know what's in it !” said Starlight, turning towards him as quick as lightning, and speaking with an angry tone in his voice, which all the music of it failed to hide. “That's just like you. A miserable, sneaking lot of pickpockets that cannot trust me to do a single thing for your benefit and my own without doubting me and poking and prying into it. Stand out of the way there, Middance, and let the boy through,” said Starlight, in a voice that somehow the man obeyed without a murmur. Then turning

to Yesslett, he added, "and now, boy, be off, and don't let me catch you stopping to listen to what I say."

Martin Crosby had quietly slipped out of the room before Middance had placed himself in the doorway, so that when Yesslett, who was quickly outside the house, had crossed to the path, he found the great fellow awaiting him in the shadow of a mossed and stunted tree.

Directly that he thought Yesslett was out of hearing, Starlight turned again to the startled looking men.

"I will tell you what that letter contained, since you must know. Oh, never mind that fellow Law," said Starlight, impatiently, in answer to the nods and signals of one of the more cautious of the men, "we have got him safe enough, for some time at least, and he knows who and what we are, so it's no good our humbugging him. He knows we're thieves, so what's the use of our aping honest men. Well, that letter was one I have manufactured for the purpose of inducing Ligan and that lubberly son of his to go to Bateman to-morrow. They'll rise to the fly, I know. And this is the reason I've done it.

"We have made Norton's Gap our headquarters for some time past, and it is about time we flitted. I don't hold with keeping in one place too long, as you know, and I've a sort of notion that our whereabouts is suspected, and that won't do for us. What I mean to do is this. To-morrow both the Lingans will start early for Bateman, and when they are out of the way we'll just drop down there in a friendly way, make a clean sweep of everything in the house—I know there

is a pile of dollars—and then quietly vamose the ranche.”

This was such a piece of base ingratitude—for the Lingans had been invariably faithful and friendly to the bushrangers—that some of the men murmured a feeble dissent, but none of them had the moral courage to boldly oppose Starlight’s determination. There is a sort of bravado in vice amongst a band such as this; none of the men likes to own himself feebler in evil-doing than his fellows. Besides this there was something so fiendish in Starlight’s unblushing iniquity, in his total want of morals, and in the pride he seemed to take in his own infamy and degradation that it overpowered the men, whose sense of right and wrong was dulled, if not destroyed, by the life of crime that they lived.

“What about Big Eliza?” asked one of the men.

“Oh,” said Starlight, with a smile that would not have disgraced an angel, “she’ll squeal a bit, and perhaps call me some hard names, for the fool thinks that I like her just because she chooses to like me. *She* won’t do us any harm. I verily believe I could tell her what I intend doing without her saying a word to her husband, or trying to stop us.”

And so he truly might have done. He knew only too well what his influence over women was. He was aware of his own beauty, and recognised its power; he therefore never neglected his appearance, and was always becomingly dressed. “From no sense of vanity I can assure you,” he once said to Crosby, smoothing down his breeches to the curves of his thighs as he spoke, “but I know the value of my stock-in-trade too well to let it deteriorate as long as I can help it.”

"Don't be too sure of Big Eliza," squeaked Foster from somewhere in the background. "She've got a temper of her own."

"Did you never like or respect any one?" said a quiet voice from the window where Alec still was leaning.

Before Starlight had made the light reply that was on his lips as he turned his smiling face to the window, the mocking, sneering voice of Middance, who was striving to emulate his leader in cynicism, said—

"That shows you don't know much o' we wicked uns, or you wouldn't ask that question. Don't you know that the wust of us," here the blackguard assumed what he thought was a religious snuffle, "the very wust, al'ys loves one pussun. Starlight loves his mother."

Swift as the swoop of an eagle Starlight turned on the fellow, and, for the first time in the memory of the gang, livid with passion, struck him a crashing blow full on his jeering mouth. Middance fell like a log, for although Starlight was not tall his muscles and sinews were of steel. Standing over the prostrate man, Starlight said, in a voice that literally quivered with rage—

"Dare to mention her name again, and, as I live, I'll strangle you!"

Middance did not move or speak: he was awed by Starlight's unusual passion, for there was something grand about the anger of this generally unmoved man.

Starlight soon regained command of himself, and, as though ashamed of his display of emotion and anger, he moved to the window where Alec

stood astonished at the sudden scene, and in his customary low tone, he said—

“I have surprised you, I see. You think a man is all good or all bad. Ah, wait a few years longer, and you will learn to take wider views. Men are many-sided cattle.”

And then, as though to correct any false impression he might have created as to his possessing more than one side himself, he crossed the room and said something, in the same melodious voice, to one of the men, so blasphemous that, accustomed though he was to the not too choice language of a station, Alec flushed hot, as if the very hearing of it seared him.

Shortly after supper the men went off to bed. They did not sit smoking late that night, for a feeling of restraint was upon them after the unusual scene of that evening. Crosby had come in some time before, looking, Alec thought, eager and excited; he said in answer to one of the men that he had seen the boy go towards Lingan's and had then come in. Alec dare not court the attention of the men by crossing the room and speaking to Martin, and he had to wait till Starlight had put out the light and sprung into his hammock, which he had let down from the hooks in the ceiling to which it was fastened in the daytime.

Besides Starlight and Alec there were two other men sleeping in the room, which was a good sized one, and it was to the circumstance that he was thus so well guarded that Alec owed the fact of his not being secured in any way. These two men were Kearney and Martin Crosby.

Alec lay in a perfect fever of anxiety, his very flesh tingling. For some little time sounds could

be heard about the place, as Foster, who was general factotum and drudge, moved in the passage or the other rooms, but at length these subsided and the house grew still. Gradually silence fell upon the room, and Alec could hear the breathing of the men grow rhythmical and deep. The night was very dark, for heavy clouds had rolled up from the sea, which lay beyond the eastern hills. As Alec lay gazing with wide open eyes at the dull grey square of the unclosed window he could not see a star. Every now and then warm puffs of air, heavy with the scent of the white jasmine growing wild and rampant in the ruined garden, came in from the outer night.

Alec could feel, he hardly knew how, that there was one person still awake in the room besides himself; he felt sure that it was Crosby, that he was watching his opportunity, and that he only bided his time till all the men had sunk to rest. It must have been nearly midnight. At last, when all the house was hushed in sleep, and when the very sighing of the trees outside seemed but the breathing of their slumber, Alec felt, before his quick ears had heard a sound, Crosby's warm breath upon his cheek. Martin had left his corner of the room, and, lying on the floor, had drawn himself, like a serpent, to where Alec lay. Knowing that the slightest sound broke Starlight's sleep, he placed his lips close to Alec's ear, and in the faintest whisper, he said—

“Your cousin has horses just beyond Lingan's. Get up and creep through the window. Don't make a sound. I'll follow.”

Without a word, only grasping Crosby's great arm to show that he understood, Alec slowly rose up, and like a ghost began to steal across the room. He

scarcely dared to breathe, and although his bare feet made not the least sound upon the floor he paused for a second after taking every step. As he passed by Starlight's hammock the bushranger turned in his sleep, and threw back the blanket from his throat. Alec felt the little draught of air it made. For a moment he stood quite still, fearing that Starlight might wake, but with a sigh he sank again into the depths of sleep. Alec reached the window, and leaning over the sill he glided, rather than climbed, through it without a sound.

The sweat was standing in beads upon his forehead, and the backs of his wrists were damp from anxiety and excitement as he stood out there in the scented darkness awaiting the coming of his friend. A moment passed, and another, still no Crosby. Had anything happened to him? Time passed so slowly to Alec in his agony of suspense that he thought something must have befallen his friend. He had made one step towards the window to see what was causing the delay when he saw Martin—for his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness of the night—slowly rising to the window ledge.

For a moment not a sound was heard ; then, just as Crosby was half through the window, the woodwork, unaccustomed to the strain, cracked, and with a loud noise a great piece of it gave way.

Without wasting a second, Martin rushed to where Alec was standing. He knew it was useless then to attempt any concealment, for the noise was enough to have roused the seven sleepers. He seized Alec by the arm and said, as he turned him towards the valley—

“This way. Come along. Speed is our only chance now.”

He was right, for as they stumbled blindly across the broken ground of the garden, tripping over some obstacle at every other step, and travelling very slowly for all their haste, they heard Starlight spring from his hammock and strike a light. Although only just aroused from his first deep sleep the bush-ranger had all his wits about him at once, and he seemed to know instinctively what had happened. Whilst still quite close to the window, the fugitives heard him shout out in a clear, loud voice—

“Kearney, Kearney, Crosby, wake up! Look alive! The boy has gone!”

But Starlight was a man of action; he was never one to wait for others when he could do a thing for himself. Before Alec and Martin, with all their eagerness, had travelled forty yards, he was leaning out of the window holding the candle above his head. The flame never flickered in the still and sultry air. In an instant he had seen them; either the light had fallen on them from the window or else their white clothes showed up against the line of dark trees beyond them. Anyway Starlight saw them, and Alec heard him sing out—

“There he is—why, there are *two*!”

Crosby also had heard it, and judging from the sound of Starlight's voice he knew he was at the window. He turned for one second and saw the light gleaming on the bright barrel of the pistol that Starlight was pointing at them. He just had time to lay his powerful hands on Alec's shoulder and swing the lad in front of him that he might cover him with his own great body from Starlight's fire.

Alec did not know what he meant by this, and half looked round, but Crosby urged him on. That

moment Alec heard two reports of a pistol follow each other in instantaneous succession, and feeling his shoulders gripped with a convulsive clutch he heard Martin say in a broken voice—

"I'm shot!"

He understood then what his friend had done for him; he knew that to screen him from Starlight's fire he had interposed his own body, and to save his life Martin had risked his own. He could not say anything of this just then; his feeling of his friend's devotion was too deep for words, and all his thoughts and all his energy were at once centred on getting Martin safely away. There was no time to waste in talking, for Alec heard answering shouts from the men in the other part of the house, and he knew that in a moment they would be in full pursuit. All that he said was—

"Can you keep up?"

Martin just said, "I'll try," and seizing Alec's right arm, partly to guide him and partly to support himself, he tore along again. Although his right arm hung broken and useless by his side, and although he could feel the hot blood pouring down his body from the wound in his broad breast, where the bullet had struck him after passing through his arm, he never faltered. For one brief second when he was struck the world seemed to swim before him, but clenching his strong teeth together he regained command of himself and resolved, with the noble obstinacy of natures such as his, that he would hold out until he had taken Alec to the place where the horses were, or die attempting it.

As they rushed down towards Lingan's they plainly heard the men leaving the house and starting



“TO SCREEN HIM FROM STARLIGHT’S FIRE HE HAD INTERPOSED HIS OWN BODY.” (p. 256.)

after them. There was some confusion at first, which gave them a little advantage, but Starlight, who remained quite cool at this crisis, calmly gave instructions to the men, and said that it was towards Lingan's that Alec and Crosby were running. Directly after this they heard two or three men start in pursuit, with the directions to shoot the runaways if they were unable to catch them. The rest of the gang, with Starlight at the head of them, rushed to the little paddock to saddle their horses.

Both Law and Crosby were barefooted, as Alec had left the house without thinking to bring his shoes, and Martin, although he had had his in his hand, had been unable to put them on. Both of them badly cut and bruised their feet against the sharp stones of the valley, but neither of them stopped, or even slackened speed, for that ; indeed, in the great dread of being caught before they could reach the horses, neither of them so much as felt the pain.

At last they reach the entrance to the valley, and behind them, not far off, they hear the heavy tramping of the men. Neither of them speaks, but Alec feels that Martin is leaning more heavily each moment on his arm. One thing only is in their favour ; their bare feet fall noiseless on the coarse rough grass on to which they now have turned, and their pursuers cannot tell which way they go. At this moment heavy drops of rain begin to fall from the lowering clouds above them—great, heavy drops of water that the heated air has warmed. Now they pass by Lingan's. The house is dark and wrapped in sleep. A sheep-dog hears the footsteps of the men, as they tear down the hill, and barks once. How strange it

sounds with all else so still. As they reach the little open space of ground, on the other side of which the long low line of black bush stretches, where Yesslett and the horses await them, they hear behind them the laboured breathing of the men. It is evident that they are gaining fast upon them. Crosby, growing faint from loss of blood, goes slower every moment; he feels he cannot maintain this killing pace. Alec hears his breath grow short. At last, when they have almost reached the place where Yesslett stands waiting with the horses, he says—his words are broken and his voice is faint—

“I can’t—keep—up. Run on. He’s waiting—horses—little way—straight ahead.”

For answer Alec takes Crosby’s arm that holds his own, places it round his shoulders, and putting his strong right arm about Martin’s waist, half lifting him, he helps him forward. As he does so he feels the poor fellow’s shirt is warm and thick with blood. Close behind him now Alec hears the men in pursuit. Kearney—he knows him by his voice—growls an oath as he kicks his foot against a stone. Crosby hears nothing, he is too faint.

Now the men wander away from them, a little to one side, and now—“Thank Heaven!—here are the horses!”

Yesslett stands between them, holding both. He has stood so long, gazing with aching eyes into the darkness, that when at last he suddenly sees the two figures before him, he almost shrieks aloud.

“Oh, Alec—” he begins.

“*Hush*, don’t speak. Keep Amber still; he must bear two of us to-night. Now, Crosby, mount,” he says, in an intense, low whisper.

But Martin only shakes his head ; he has no strength left.

“For Heaven’s sake, try !”

No, he cannot do it. But Alec, though almost in despair, for every second he expects to feel the hands of the bushrangers upon him, will not give in. He pushes Crosby to the horse. “Stand still there. Whoa there, Amber !” and placing one bare heavy foot of the fainting man in the stirrup, he stoops, and half lifts, half pushes Martin into the saddle. Then, springing up behind, he holds him up with one rigid arm—he seems to have the strength of ten to-night—and grasps the reins with the other.

“Now, Yesslett—*quick !*” he says, and puts his horse in motion.

As he starts a figure wildly crashes through the bushes, and, grasping Yesslett’s bridle, Kearney, in a triumphant voice, yells out—

“Not so fast, my master.”

That very moment Starlight, who, with the mounted men of the gang, had followed them at a break-neck pace from the house, dashes on to the open ground, and dimly catching sight of something moving at the edge of the bush, draws his fatal pistol from his belt and fires.

A blinding blaze, a crash, one wild shriek of agony, and Yesslett feels his bridle free ; for Kearney falls by the hand of his own leader.

CHAPTER XXVII

A WILD NIGHT-RIDE.

THE instant Yesslett felt that his bridle was free, he leaped upon his horse; how he managed to scramble up he could not tell, but grasping the pommel of his saddle, and with it a good handful of his horse's mane, he succeeded somehow in hauling himself to his seat. Alec turned as he heard the report of the pistol; he knew not what new misfortune had happened to them.

"What's that? Are you hurt, Yess?"

"No, no, ride on!" rang out Yesslett's clear boy's voice. "They've shot one of their own men who tried to stop me."

And now the rain began to fall in earnest. Whilst in the bush they were sheltered from it, though they could hear the rustling and the pattering of it on the leaves as it fell on the dense mass of the foliage overhead. Out in the open, when they had passed the belt of bush, they were wet to the skin in a moment. Their shirts clung close about their bodies, and as Alec and Martin were hatless, the rain streamed and trickled from their hair.

Notwithstanding his double load Amber kept up nobly, though Alec well knew that their present pace could not be maintained, but as long as he could hold out Alec did not mean to give in. Trusting entirely to his horse, for the darkness was profound in the depth of the bush, Alec tore madly along the

rough and treacherous path. Wet leaves and twigs lashed his face as he passed, and once Amber stumbled and almost fell over a smooth bare root that lay exposed across the track. But fortune was kind, and no accident befell them. Yesslett followed close behind him, riding as recklessly as he.

At first it was as much as Alec could do to keep Martin in the saddle, for the half-swooning fellow swayed and lurched terribly from side to side. Once he lost consciousness entirely, and his heavy head fell back upon Alec's shoulder, and his body became inert and helpless. But the pouring rain which beat upon his upturned face when next they crossed a stretch of open ground seemed to revive him, for with a mighty effort he pulled himself together and sat up.

They had lost all trace of path by this time, having left the better marked bush track behind them, and neither Alec nor Yesslett had any idea which direction to take; but here Crosby came to their assistance, for dark though it was, he was able to recognise some landmarks, and could guide them aright. They were now close to the Dixieville road, he said, and they struck it shortly afterwards some good distance below Badger's Creek, and to the westward of it.

"Here, collar the reins," Alec had said, as soon as he found that Martin had recovered a little, and knew where they were. "I can't see where we are going, and my left arm is quite stiff, and as I don't mean to loose my hold of you, old fellow, my right arm is employed. I wish I could ease you, for you must be suffering agonies with that broken arm of yours."

"I can bear it," said Crosby, in a low voice.

"Shall we go slower now that we have distanced

them?" said Alec. "Amber is about knocked up, and no wonder, poor old chap, with two great men on his back."

"Distanced them! What do you mean?" said Yesslett, who was now riding alongside of Alec. "Listen! Can't you hear the galloping of their horses? They are not a hundred yards behind!"

"I hear them if you can't," said Martin, faintly. "This horse of yours cannot carry two of us, and still keep up his speed. Let me slip off, you could outstrip them then. They'd pass me by without seeing me. It doesn't matter if they don't, for I'm nearly done for."

Alec did not waste breath in contradicting him; he only turned his head sideways to Yesslett, clasping Crosby's body even tighter than before.

"Yes, I hear them now. I thought we had left them far behind. Give me back the reins, I can manage. Our work is not all done yet. Yesslett, it again depends on you. We will dash on ahead a little way, and then I'll turn Amber off the road. You tear on at full gallop towards Bateman; let them hear you, they may not notice that one of us has dropped behind. Which horse is it you have?"

"Herring."

"He'll carry you well enough. Take it out of him. They dare not follow you into Bateman. Now then for a dash."

Amber answered to Alec's voice and heel, for the horse had as brave a spirit as his master, and, although labouring terribly, managed a very quick burst of a hundred yards or so. Saying to his cousin, "Now Yesslett, keep on; ride like mad; don't spare the horse," Alec then suddenly wheeled to one side, and quietly pulled up some little way from the road. He

could hear Yesslett tearing along, and a moment after, like the gust of a storm, three or four horses dashed madly past.

In a few minutes afterwards, thundering and splashing along the muddy road, Yesslett reached Badger's Creek. He recognised it as the place where he had turned off the road to ride to Norton's Gap that afternoon. Plunging along, at times fetlock deep in mud, he was passing Badger's Creek at racing speed, when a body of horsemen, coming in the opposite direction, managed to catch his foaming horse and pulled him up short. Yesslett, of course, could recognise no one of them, but he hoped they might be honest men, and hardly giving himself time to take breath, he began—

"I don't know who you are, but will you help me? My name is Yesslett Dudley; my cousin, Alec Law, and a wounded man are just behind, and Starlight and his men are after us. Here they come, here they come!" said the boy, mad with excitement.

"A' richt, Yasslutt. Ye're amang frens."

As Macleod spoke—for it was he, with a little band of police and friends which he had collected in Bateman for the purpose of seizing Starlight and his gang at Norton's Gap—the four bushrangers came rushing to their doom. As they dashed up quite close to where he and his friends were standing, Yesslett heard Starlight say to the men, for he had to raise his voice to make himself heard above the noise of the horses—

"Where on earth have those plucky young beggars got to? I can't hear them. If they escape us I shall think my luck has gone at last."

As he spoke, the leader of the capturing party—

Collman, the chief store-keeper of Bateman—sprang out from the side of the road, and snatched at his bridle, saying—

“Your luck *has* gone at last. We’ve got you this time, Starlight.”

But the bushranger was too quick for him. He instantly saw the trap he had tumbled into, and pulling his mare up suddenly and lifting her head round by sheer strength he put her straight at the fence which divided the road from the edge of the precipitous side of the creek. As the beautiful grey rose to the leap, Starlight shouted out, with a laugh—

“No, not you ; you haven’t got me yet !”

They could hear him crashing down the steep, rocky side of the ravine, brushwood and dead scrub cracking before him, and loosened stones leaping down, and then, at last, a great sudden splash as the horse and rider plunged into the swollen stream of the flooded creek. No one dared risk his neck by following ; indeed, it would have been useless to seek him that night, it was so dark.

When a search was made the following morning no trace of Starlight or his horse could be found, though the party sought him far down the creek. Thus, as mysteriously as he had lived—for no one knew who he really was or whence he came—Starlight vanished from the country side which he had infested and plundered for so long with impunity. As his body was not found they could not even tell whether he was really dead or whether he had added another to his long list of daring escapes. He disappeared without a sign, leaving no one to mourn him but Mrs. Lingan—for Big Eliza’s heart was womanly and

tender if her exterior was masculine and hard—and she, poor soul, could only weep for him in secret. She never learned his intended treachery towards herself.

The three other men, who had not been quick enough, or who had not had the courage to follow Starlight's bold example, were quickly captured by Macleod and the party with him. Although they fought like demons, they were soon overpowered, and with their hands secured behind their backs they were ignominiously led into Bateman, a couple of hours afterwards, in the charge of the valiant Collman. These three were Wetch, Middance, and a German named Schnadd. They were sent down by the police to Bowen, where they were tried, some weeks after, and hanged for murders they had committed in the spring of that year. Thus Starlight's gang was broken up, the only two members of it remaining, Foster and one other man, decamping before the raid was made next day upon Norton's Gap.

When the three bushrangers had been secured and sent off in safe custody to Bateman, Yesslett at once led Macleod, and the one or two men of the band that remained, to the place where Alec and Crosby had turned off from the road, but though they spent some little time looking for them they were unable to find them.

"Don't fash yoursel' aboot it, Yasslutt," said Macleod. "Alec knows verra weel whaur he is, an' he's joost gan hame ower Taunton's auld roon. If we ride back shairply we will be theer befure him."

It had happened just as Macleod had suspected; not knowing of the relief party that was coming to their rescue, and believing that Yesslett would ride

into Bateman without stopping, Alec had determined to turn away from the road, so that crossing Taunton's and getting on to their own run he could reach home quicker than by following the road. He had become terribly anxious about Crosby, for when he next spoke to him, after the bushrangers had dashed past, he gained no reply. The man had fainted from loss of blood. Amber, full of spirit though he was, could no longer go at more than a foot pace; the last wild burst, with his double burden on his back, had quite exhausted him; thus Alec was compelled to slowness when more than ever he wished for speed. He still managed to keep Martin from falling from the horse, but the strain upon him was growing very severe, for the inert body of the man swayed with every movement of the horse, and he had by sheer strength to sustain his whole weight. Crosby's broken arm hung limp and useless by his side, and his heavy head fell back on Alec's shoulder.

In his impatience it seemed to him that they did not more than creep; how slowly the night rolled past; it must surely soon be day. He felt that Martin's body began to grow cold in his arms, his wet clothes clinging about him, and chilling him to stone. He feared that he might slip from insensibility to death before the help, that was now so near at hand, could be reached. The horror of those long hours, in the silence and the darkness, with the dead or dying man, he knew not which, lying inertly in his stiffening arms, he never forgot.

The rain had ceased, and above the dark outline of the distant hills the late rising moon rode slowly through the sky. Dimly, through the widening rifts between the clouds, she shone upon them, tinging the

drifting vaporous edges with a dull ochreous yellow. By her pale light Alec saw that Martin's wound still bled. This gave him some faint hope, for he saw that life was not extinct. Pulling up a handful of his blood-stained shirt, and crumpling it into a ball, Alec placed it over the wound and firmly pressed it there to stop the bleeding. He was very tender with him, and he almost felt, despite his anxiety to get his friend safely home, that there was something akin to happiness in thus being the one to minister, however roughly, to his wants ; and to feel that he alone, with his right arm, upheld him on the horse, added a sort of suppressed exultation to his love for the man who had sacrificed so much to his friendship for him.

As the night cleared, familiar sounds awoke in the bush, the edge of which he was skirting ; the very voices of the night birds seemed to give him welcome home to Wandaroo. At last he reached the fence of the great home paddock, and managed with his one arm to move the top rail of the slip panels. He passed through, Amber neatly stepping the bottom rail. How near he felt to home at last. The very fragrance of the moistened earth seemed different from any other in his loving nostrils. At length the last hill was climbed, and the house, with many windows ablaze with lights, was in full view.

With a wildly beating heart, Alec crossed the yard and reached the door. He could not get off his horse without some help, so sitting where he was he called to those within. The door was flung open, a blaze of light poured out and fell upon the foam-flecked, sweating horse, the blood-stained, hatless, and white-faced rider, and the apparently lifeless burden

that he held in his arms. Half terrified, the woman who appeared drew back, and Margaret, beautiful, calm Margaret, took her place.

"*Alec!* Is it you? Thank God!"

For a moment Alec tried to speak; but in vain. The words would not come. Margaret saw his trouble, and guessed its object.

"All goes well," she said.

Others then came rushing out from the house and took Alec's burden from him, and helped him from the horse, but it was Margaret who first caught Martin in her brave strong arms; it was Margaret who helped to carry him into the house; and when she stooped over the bed on which they laid him to see if still he breathed, it was Margaret who, with her warm red lips, kissed life back again to the cold pale ones of her lover.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IS IT TOO LATE?

IT was the morning of the second day after Alec's return to Wandaroo with his senseless burden in his arms. The sun was stealing into the room through the half drawn curtains of the open windows, the scent of the garden flowers was in the morning air, and from his cage in the verandah a bird was pouring out its heart in song. Breakfast was over two hours ago, and Mrs. Beffling was already coming to inquire "whether the poorly gentlemen were ready for a little lunch." The room was full of pleasant sounds of life and happy talking, for now that Alec, his brown face ruddy with the glow of the sun, came in through the window, all the family was assembled.

Geordie had been allowed to leave his room that morning; he was pale and a little less noisy than was his wont, but, excepting a slight tendency to stagger when he walked, he was otherwise much his old self. He only wanted what Mrs. Beffling called "cockering up a bit," to be as strong and hearty as ever. Yesslett was by his side, proud to be employed by such a hero of romance as Geordie was. He himself was very modest of his own share in the late adventures, though when his aunt had kissed him and thanked him for the service he had rendered them all by helping Alec to escape, he certainly felt a glow of pride and happiness in his heart. He and Macleod had reached home, on the night of the escape from

Norton's Gap, only half an hour or so before Alec arrived.

And who is that with one of Alec's coats slung loosely over his bandaged arm? He is standing by the window talking earnestly with Margaret, who, with parted, half smiling lips and downcast eyes, plays with a fragile pink rose from the garden as she listens to his low words. Martin looks pale, and, although standing squarely on his feet, he leans against the window as though he still felt weak. He had lost enough blood, the doctor said, to kill an ordinary man and had been ordered to lie in bed, for some days at least, but Martin was too happy to waste his time a-bed. He thought he had recognised in his sweet nurse's face that which he longed to see there, and had, weak though he was in body, that morning put to the test the question he had not dared to ask when strong and well in his uncle's house, some months before, in Brisbane. He had no ring or gage of love to give when they plighted troth in the garden, but he had pulled a rosebud from the creeping bush that grew against the house and gave it to Margaret.

"It is like the flower of love," he said, "that is daring now to blossom in my heart."

As Alec came in through the open window, and looked from one to the other of them, Margaret slowly blushed from throat to forehead, but raised her honest eyes to his and looked him frankly in the face. She was ashamed of nothing, but was proud of the great gift she gave and took. Crosby laid his hand affectionately on Alec's shoulder, and looked as though he were about to speak, but Alec, who, from what Martin had told him before, knew something of all this, said—

"I understand. Margaret, I am very glad. Shall I tell mother?"

She shook her head.

"No, it will come best from myself. I will tell her at once."

"Margaret," said Mrs. Law at this moment from the other side of the room, "here's Beffling been asking Mr. Crosby three times what he would like for his lunch."

"There's some o' my beef-tea, sir, reel kind, which I can hot it in a minnut. With a strip or two of toast it do relish of a mornin'. I'm sure, sir, if I may mek so bold as t' say, you wants a little something to bring back the colour to your cheeks. Or a chop now, done rare, but brown o' the outside," said the buxom old creature, holding up one fat finger to emphasise her description and smiling a seductive smile.

"Thank you, Mrs. Beffling, I should like them both, I'm sure," said Crosby, stepping forward with a beaming face from the window, "but I feel as though I had everything I want on earth, and therefore am not hungry."

"Lucky bargee," said Yesslett to Geordie, who answered with an impudent grin, for he had begun to suspect what turn things were taking.

"Which both it *shall* be," said Mrs. Beffling, accepting the first part of Martin's sentence, but utterly ignoring the latter half of it. "Also the hegg beat up in milk for you, Mr. George; yes, you must, the doctor says so, and I shall send it in whether you drinks it or no, and every *drop* is expected to be took." Quite breathless after this, but smiling on the invalids as though they conferred a personal favour on her by

being ill, the kind-hearted old soul retreated to her fortress, where she instantly set about preparing these few trifles for the interesting convalescents.

To see her beaming face when she brought in a tray was better than any doctor's stuff; and often and often have patients taken her nourishing things when they loathed the very idea of food, sooner than disappoint her or wound her feelings by refusing them.

"Yess," whispered Geordie, "you'll have to help me out with my jorum; I haven't got over my breakfast yet."

"All right," said Yesslett, in the most obliging manner. He ought to have ridden over to the South Creek Station that morning, but he had struck, and nothing would induce him to go before to-morrow he said, for he had not heard any of the boys' adventures yet, as Geordie had not been allowed to talk much till that morning, and Alec had spent nearly all yesterday either in Geordie's or Martin's room. Now, at last, he had both of them, and Crosby as well, to question and to listen to, "and that's what I mean to do," he said.

He did not do it then, however, for almost directly after Mrs. Beffling had left the room the door was flung wide open and Macleod appeared, in what, for him, was a white heat of indignation and anger, for the sincere, cold-blooded, but affectionate old Scotsman rarely expressed any emotion whatever.

"Did ony mon iver heer tell o' sich doen's? Ah've joost ridden uver fra' Bateman, an' theer ah've seen, 'deed leddies it's true, that foul, whamsie scrappit, Crosbie o' Brisbane. He's got a bit of a lawyer chap wi' him, as a whitnuss, I suppoose, as all his doen's are legal accordin' to law. He says he's coomin' to

Wandaroo to put a mon in legal possession o' the roon; and that unless we can produce £4,887 18s. 7d.," here the precise Macleod looked at a strip of paper, torn from the edge of some journal, on which he had written the amount, "this verra dae we all must pack; for this is the last o' the daes o' grace agreed to i' the deed, and time is oop at twalve the dae. He says he'll be heer at haif-past eleven to gie us time to make payment in coin o' the realm or gould as agreed upon. He lached as he said it, the black souled scoondrel, an' I rhode back streicht awa'. It's aboon eleeven noo. What mun we do?"

Mrs. Law shook her head. She could do nothing. Although all her fears were now being brought to pass she could not feel wholly unhappy or wholly crushed; she had dreaded a greater loss, and now that her sons were both restored to her, after so nearly losing both, she could not help feeling that everything else was small compared with that great mercy.

"I suppose we must go," she said. "The blow is harder coming from one we trusted as a friend."

Geordie sprang up as Macleod finished speaking. His pale face was brilliant with excitement. Alec had told him that as yet he had said nothing of the gold, and that he meant to wait till George was strong enough to go with him to rescue it from its hiding-place. His voice was vibrating with triumph and delight as he said—

"Go, mother? Not we, indeed! What must you do, Macleod? Why, start off with Alec and see what he thinks about matters. Alec, you know. Take two or three men, and just look sharp about it. I wish I were strong enough to go. I believe I am; I feel quite right."

But he found his strength was not equal to his courage when he came to try.

"Yesslett, you go with Alec. It is more exciting than anything Crosby or I can tell you. And now I am not going to say another word about it till Alec comes back."

He was quite resolute, and notwithstanding the entreaties of Mrs. Law and Margaret and Martin he would not give them any further clue to his meaning.

Alec darted from the room, followed by Macleod and Yesslett, and a moment afterwards they saw them from the verandah, riding towards "the Dip" in the paddock, accompanied by Willetts and Howard from the Yarrun Station, who happened to be ready mounted in the yard.

Rather more than half an hour after Alec's departure to "the Dip" there was a great commotion amongst the dogs about the yard; they ran barking to the other side of the house, as they never did but when strangers rode up to the station. A moment or so afterwards Mrs. Beffling came in, all floury as to her arms, and said that two gentlemen, "leastways, ma'am, they wears coats and cloth trousers," had ridden up to the house, and that they wished to see Mrs. Law.

"Yes, I expected them. Show them in here, Beffling," said Mrs. Law, quite calmly.

Geordie was surprised to see how quietly his mother awaited her unwelcome guests. He was alone in the room with Mrs. Law, as Crosby and Margaret had gone into the garden just before.

It rather astonished George to find that Mr. Crosby, when he came in the next moment, was not a cruel, miserly-looking man, for he had depicted him

in his imagination as a little, thin, and eager-faced man, with hungry eyes and bird-like claws. Old Crosby was small, to be sure, and had thin, tightly pursed-up lips, but the general expression of his face was kindly, almost benign. His voice, when he spoke, matched it, for it was smooth, insinuating, and false in every tone of it. He came in smiling and settling his yellow, unwholesome-looking neck in his limp shirt collar. His friend followed close behind him.

"Very sorry to have to come on unpleasant business, ma'am. Perhaps you expected us? It gives me great pain to have to resort to extreme measures, great pain, I assure you. I hope you have the money ready," said Crosby, hypocritically.

Here he tried to smile, and wiped his flushed and swollen looking face, for he lied, and he knew that he did it clumsily, and he felt the contemptuous eyes of Mrs. Law and Geordie upon him. It was the one wish of his heart to get Wandaroo into his greedy clutches, and he felt that it was his already. Still Mrs. Law did not speak, and, feeling the silence very confusing, old Crosby continued—

"You see I'm in sad want of money, sad want, or I should never dream of foreclosing. No one but a friend would have lent you so much on the place."

"No one but a *friend*, like you, would have extorted 15 per cent. upon the sum that was lent us," said Mrs. Law, quietly.

"Oh, it's a sad business, a sad business. Women never understand these things. Women ought never to meddle in business."

"Men ought never to take advantage of them if they do," said Geordie, hotly.

"Who's that?" said the old man sharply. "Oh I

see ; very like his father, very. Just what he would have said. What do you make the time, Mr. Tuckle ?” said Crosby, nervously fingering his watch, which he had pulled from his pocket with a shaky hand.

“Twenty minutes to twelve, sir.”

“Then you still have twenty minutes to pay me in,” said Crosby, with an oily cackle of laughter. “I’m sorry to have to insist upon strict punctuality, but I must. Times are so hard, and I’ve had such a capital offer made me for Wandaroo by a rich Englishman, just out—Harrison Tait. Mr. Harrison Tait, that’s his name. Up till twelve Wandaroo is yours, ma’am, and then—unless, of course, you pay—it’s mine. I think I’m right, Mr. Tuckle ?”

“Yes, to-day is the last day of grace, and it ends at twelve,” said the lawyer, who did not seem to greatly like the part he had to play in this painful scene. He had been sent up by Mr. Tait to report to him upon the estate, the title-deeds of which old Crosby had agreed to hand over to him at once.

“Won’t you gentlemen take seats ?” said Mrs. Law, in her most dignified way ; and then, to keep up the reputation for hospitality which Wandaroo had always possessed, she added, “And may I offer you any refreshment ? I suppose I can do so for, at least, the next twenty minutes.”

As Mrs. Law was speaking Martin and Margaret stepped into the room. Mr. Crosby grew even more flushed and purple than before when he saw his nephew.

“Hey, you fellow ! Confound you, what are *you* doing here ?” he said, in the most insulting manner.

“You will kindly remember, sir,” said Mrs. Law,

waxing indignant, "that this is not your house as yet, and that this gentleman is my guest."

"Gentleman, indeed! He is my nephew."

"The two things certainly are not very compatible," said Mrs. Law, quietly.

"What am I doing here?" said Martin, with an amused look on his face. "Why, I am wooing my wife. This lady, notwithstanding the fact that she will thereby become your niece, which *is* a drawback, has consented to marry me."

"Marry her!" almost shrieked the elder Crosby. "Why, she is a beggar."

"And so am I, and a very lucky beggar, too. Now, don't put yourself about, or you'll have an apoplectic fit as sure as fate. You know what the doctor said. You do look as though you were going to have one this morning."

"Martin!" roared the passionate old man, "if you marry ——"

"Don't go on. I know exactly what you are going to say. You will disinherit me. Eh? For goodness sake do it, and have done with it at once. That threat is quite worn out. Don't foam at the mouth, it's unseemly."

"Hush," said Margaret, laying her hand on Martin's arm. "Remember he is your uncle after all."

As the minutes sped by and no Alec appeared, Geordie began to grow terribly anxious lest, after all, Alec could not get at the gold in time, and that Wandaroo would, as it were, slip through their very fingers for the want of a single hour's work. He could not sit still, but fidgetted about the room in a state of sickening suspense. Every half minute he went out

on to the verandah to see if the party were yet returning, and, as the minutes passed, and no Alec came, an awful feeling of despair began to creep over him. It was too cruel to be borne, that after all their labour, all their dangers, and all their sufferings, the gold they had won should yet be too late for its purpose. Margaret and Mrs. Law, having given up all hopes, and not understanding Geordie's excitement or Alec's sudden departure, were quite calm now that the hour had come.

Ten minutes to twelve ; nine minutes to ; eight minutes to ; still no sign of Alec. Geordie was on the verandah, gazing eagerly across the paddock. Not the sound of a hoof could he hear. He could have yelled from the intensity of his distress and mortification ; as it was he only thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets, and grimly clutched their contents.

Seven minutes to twelve !

"We may as well go," said old Crosby, mopping his perspiring face. "It is no use our waiting."

"It isn't twelve yet," cried George, rushing into the room.

"Well, six minutes won't do much for you, I expect," said Tuckle.

George hurried back to the verandah. Was that the sound of horses madly galloping up the hill ? Yes, *yes*, it was ! Hurrah ! He could see them now rising over the ridge and entering the yard. He rushed along the verandah, weak though he was, and shrieked—

"Make haste. Bring it in, bring it in. You'll be in time yet."

For he saw that the riders held the muddy, black and streaming bags of gold.



“ ‘YOUR PRICE IS THERE!’ ” (p. 279.)

Inside the room Mr. Crosby had just risen from his chair; there was an evil look of triumph on his shiny, crimson face. He slipped his watch back into his pocket as he rose.

"Two minutes to twelve; nothing *can* help it now. *Wandaroo is mine!*"

As he spoke, whilst the very words were on his lips, the door burst open, and panting, breathless, sweating with the heat and labour, Alec and the other men dashed headlong into the room. His hat was off, his curly hair was tumbled, his eyes gleamed with happiness and intolerable excitement, and his voice rang high with a mad triumph.

"Hold hard! 'tis *not*, for your price is there!"

As he spoke he and the other men threw down their burdens—the room shook with the ponderous weight—and many of the bags bursting open with the fall poured their treasure of gold in a stream at Crosby's feet.

For a moment there was a thrilling silence in the room. The feelings of all were too high-strung for words. The first to break it was Mr. Crosby; his face was grey and ghastly, his whole figure had become altered and stricken in that one minute. In a dry, shrill voice, he whined to Tuckle—

"I won't have it; I refuse it. Must I take it?"

"I fear you must. English coin is so scarce in the Colony that the Government at Brisbane has decided that, for a time, gold, such as this, is legal tender at £4 the ounce."

Macleod laughed. "Wull ye tak' the whole amoont wi' ye noo?"

"Send it after us to Bateman," said Tuckle, speaking for Crosby, as he went out to get their horses.

Martin saw that his uncle had received a cruel blow, and that he looked ill and very aged, and, feeling pity for him, he offered him the support of his arm, but the old man flung it aside and tottered from the room alone.

The action was typical of his life. He had always spurned that which should have been his greatest happiness. He never saw his nephew again, for after reaching Bateman that day, overwhelmed with chagrin and futile passion, he was struck down with the fit the doctors had foretold. He died before Martin could reach him, and before he could alter, had he wished to do so, the will which made his nephew his sole heir. So that after all the gold for which the boys had been in quest did not go out of the family, for the morning that Martin and Margaret—sound friends and true lovers—became one, “till death does them part,” Alec and Geordie received back from their new brother the title-deeds of Wandaroo, which he had found amongst his uncle’s papers, and for which he steadily refused to take an ounce of the—to him—unnecessary gold.

THE END.

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